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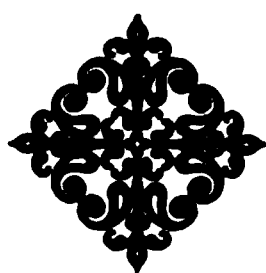
THE NOVELS AND TALES OF
HENRY JAMES

New York Edition

VOLUME IX

THE AWKWARD AGE

HENRY JAMES



N E W Y O R K

CHARLES SCRIBNER'S SONS

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PREFACE

I RECALL with perfect ease the idea in which "The Awkward Age" had its origin, but re-perusal gives me pause in respect to naming it. This composition, as it stands, makes, to my vision — and will have made perhaps still more to that of its readers — so considerable a mass beside the germ sunk in it and still possibly distinguishable, that I am half-moved to leave my small secret undivulged. I shall encounter, I think, in the course of this copious commentary, no better example, and none on behalf of which I shall venture to invite more interest, of the quite incalculable tendency of a mere grain of subject-matter to expand and develop and cover the ground when conditions happen to favour it. I say all, surely, when I speak of the thing as planned, in perfect good faith, for brevity, for levity, for simplicity, for jocosity, in fine, and for an accommodating irony. I invoked, for my protection, the spirit of the lightest comedy, but "The Awkward Age" was to belong, in the event, to a group of productions, here re-introduced, which have in common, to their author's eyes, the endearing sign that they asserted in each case an unforeseen principle of growth. They were projected as small things, yet had finally to be provided for as comparative monsters. That is my own title for them, though I should perhaps resent it if applied by another critic — above all in the case of the piece before us, the careful measure of which I have just freshly taken. The result of this consideration has been in the first place to render sharp for me again the interest of the whole process thus illustrated, and in the second quite to place me on unexpectedly good terms with the work itself. As I scan my list I encounter none the "history" of which embodies a greater number of curious truths — or of truths at least by which I find contemplation more enlivened. The thing done and dismissed has ever,

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in the billiard-room of the country-house at which they are staying; such as the other nocturnal passage, under Mr. Longdon's roof, between Vanderbank and Mitchy, where the conduct of so much fine meaning, so many flares of the exhibitory torch through the labyrinth of mere immediate appearances, mere familiar allusions, is successfully and safely effected; such as the whole array of the terms of presentation that are made to serve, all systematically, yet without a gap anywhere, for the presentation, throughout, of a Mitchy "subtle" no less than concrete and concrete no less than deprived of that officious explanation which we know as "going behind"; such as, briefly, the general service of co-ordination and vivification rendered, on lines of ferocious, of really quite heroic compression, by the picture of the assembled group at Mrs. Grendon's, where the "cross-references" of the action are as thick as the green leaves of a garden, but none the less, as they have scenically to be, counted and disposed, weighted with responsibility. Were I minded to use in this connexion a "loud" word — and the critic in general hates loud words as a man of taste may hate loud colours — I should speak of the composition of the chapters entitled "Tishy Grendon," with all the pieces of the game on the table together and each unconfusedly and contributively placed, as triumphantly scientific. I must properly remind myself, rather, that the better lesson of my retrospect would seem to be really a supreme revision of the question of what it may be for a subject to suffer, to call it suffering, by over-treatment. Bowed down so long by the inference that its product had in this case proved such a betrayal, my artistic conscience meets the relief of having to recognise truly here no traces of suffering. The thing carries itself to my maturer and gratified sense as with every symptom of soundness, an insolence of health and joy. And from this precisely I deduce my moral; which is to the effect that, since our only way, in general, of knowing that we have had too much of anything is by *feeling* that too much: so, by the same token, when we don't feel the excess (and I am contending, mind, that in "The Awkward Age" the multi-

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plicity yields to the order) how do we know that the measure not recorded, the notch not reached, does represent adequacy or satiety? The mere feeling helps us for certain degrees of congestion, but for exact science, that is for the criticism of "fine" art, we want the notation. The notation, however, is what we lack, and the verdict of the mere feeling is liable to fluctuate. In other words an imputed defect is never, at the worst, disengageable, or other than matter for appreciation — to come back to my claim for that felicity of the dramatist's case that his synthetic "whole" *is* his form, the only one we have to do with. I like to profit in his company by the fact that if our art has certainly, for the impression it produces, to defer to the rise and fall, in the critical temperature, of the telltale mercury, it still has n't to reckon with the engraved thermometer-face.

HENRY JAMES.

THE AWKWARD AGE

BOOK FIRST

LADY JULIA

THE AWKWARD AGE

I

SAVE when it happened to rain Vanderbank always walked home, but he usually took a hansom when the rain was moderate and adopted the preference of the philosopher when it was heavy. On this occasion he therefore recognised as the servant opened the door a congruity between the weather and the "four-wheeler" that, in the empty street, under the glazed radiance, waited and trickled and blackly glittered. The butler mentioned it as on such a wild night the only thing they could get, and Vanderbank, having replied that it was exactly what would do best, prepared in the doorway to put up his umbrella and dash down to it. At this moment he heard his name pronounced from behind and on turning found himself joined by the elderly fellow guest with whom he had talked after dinner and about whom later on upstairs he had sounded his hostess. It was at present a clear question of how this amiable, this apparently unassertive person should get home — of the possibility of the other cab for which even now one of the footmen, with a whistle to his lips, craned out his head and listened through the storm. Mr. Longdon wondered to Vanderbank if their course might by any chance be the same; which led our young friend immediately to express a readiness to see him safely in any direction that should accommodate him. As the footman's

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herself so cleverly, to make up for the obloquy of that state, of the benefits and immunities it brings with it. She has bloomed in the hot-house of her widowhood — she's a Neapolitan hatched by an incubator."

"A Neapolitan?" — Mr. Longdon seemed all civilly to wish he had only known it.

"Her husband was one; but I believe that dukes at Naples are as thick as princes at Petersburg. He's dead, at any rate, poor man, and she has come back here to live."

"Gloomily, I should think — after Naples?" Mr. Longdon threw out.

"Oh it would take more than even a Neapolitan past — ! However" — and the young man caught himself up — "she lives not in what's behind her, but in what's before — she lives in her precious little Aggie."

"Little Aggie?" Mr. Longdon risked a cautious interest.

"I don't take a liberty there," Vanderbank smiled: "I speak only of the young Agnesina, a little girl, the Duchess's niece, or rather I believe her husband's, whom she has adopted — in the place of a daughter early lost — and has brought to England to marry."

"Ah to some great man of course!"

Vanderbank thought. "I don't know." He gave a vague but expressive sigh. "She's rather lovely, little Aggie."

Mr. Longdon looked conspicuously subtle. "Then perhaps you're the man — !"

"Do I look like a 'great' one?" Vanderbank broke in.

II

MR. LONGDON had gone to the place — little Nanda was in glazed white wood. He took her up and held her out; for a moment he said nothing, but presently, over his glasses, rested on his host a look intenser even than his scrutiny of the faded image. "Do they give their portraits now?"

"Little girls — innocent lambs? Surely — to old friends. Did n't they in your time?"

Mr. Longdon studied the portrait again; after which, with an exhalation of something between superiority and regret, "They never did to me," he returned.

"Well, you can have all you want now!" Vanderbank laughed.

His friend gave a slow droll headshake. "I don't want them 'now'!"

"You could do with them, my dear sir, still," Vanderbank continued in the same manner, "every bit *I* do!"

"I'm sure you do nothing you ought n't." Mr. Longdon kept the photograph and continued to look at it. "Her mother told me about her — promised me I should see her next time."

"You must — she's a great friend of mine."

Mr. Longdon was really deep in it. "Is she clever?"

Vanderbank turned it over. "Well, you'll tell me if you think so."

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some and who was usually with them?" he went on.

Mr. Longdon looked so uncertain that he explained he meant his other sister; on which his companion said: "Oh her? Yes, she was charming — she evidently had a future too."

"Well, she's in the midst of her future now. She's married."

"And whom did she marry?"

"A fellow called Toovey. A man in the City."

"Oh!" said Mr. Longdon a little blankly. Then as if to retrieve his blankness: "But why do you call her Nancy? Was n't her name Blanche?"

"Exactly — Blanche Bertha Vanderbank."

Mr. Longdon looked half-mystified and half-distressed. "And now she's Nancy Toovey?"

Vanderbank broke into laughter at his dismay. "That's what every one calls her."

"But why?"

"Nobody knows. You see you were right about her future."

Mr. Longdon gave another of his soft smothered sighs; he had turned back again to the first photograph, which he looked at for a longer time. "Well, it was n't *her* way."

"My mother's? No indeed. Oh my mother's way — !" Vanderbank waited, then added gravely: "She was taken in time."

Mr. Longdon turned half-round as to reply to this, but instead of replying proceeded afresh to an examination of the expressive oval in the red plush frame. He took up little Aggie, who appeared

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“Why time to make herself loved.”

Vanderbank wondered. “By the men who come to the house?”

Mr. Longdon slightly attenuated this way of putting it. “Yes — and in the home circle. Where’s the ‘strain’ — of her being suffered to be a member of it?”

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This explanation was very delicately made. "She *could* marry again."

"And I suppose you know she did," Vanderbank returned.

"I knew it soon enough!" With this, abruptly, Mr. Longdon pulled himself forward. "Good-night, good-night."

"Good-night," said Vanderbank. "But was n't that *after* Lady Julia?"

On the edge of the sofa, his hands supporting him, Mr. Longdon looked straight. "There was nothing after Lady Julia."

"I see." His companion smiled. "My mother was earlier."

"She was extremely good to me. I'm not speaking of that time at Malvern — that came later."

"Precisely — I understand. You're speaking of the first years of her widowhood."

Mr. Longdon just faltered. "I should call them rather the last. Six months later came her second marriage."

Vanderbank's interest visibly improved. "Ah it was *then*? That was about my seventh year." He called things back and pieced them together. "But she must have been older than you."

"Yes — a little. She was kindness itself to me at all events, then and afterwards. That was the charm of the weeks at Malvern."

"I see," the young man laughed. "The charm was that you had recovered."

"Oh dear, no!" Mr. Longdon, rather to his mystification, exclaimed. "I'm afraid I had n't recovered

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"Just how you were affected? I assure you there's at this moment nothing I desire nearly so much."

"I'm no judge then," Mr. Longdon began; "I'm no critic; I'm no talker myself. I'm old-fashioned and narrow and ignorant. I've lived for years in a hole. I'm not a man of the world."

Vanderbank considered him with a benevolence, a geniality of approval, that he literally had to hold in check for fear of seeming to patronise. "There's not one of us who can touch you. You're delightful, you're wonderful, and I'm intensely curious to hear you," the young man pursued. "Were we absolutely odious?" Before his guest's puzzled, finally almost pained face, such an air of appreciating so much candour, yet of looking askance at so much freedom, he could only try to smooth the way and light the subject. "You see we don't in the least know where we are. We're lost — and you find us." Mr. Longdon, as he spoke, had prepared at last really to go, reaching the door with a manner that denoted, however, by no means so much satiety as an attention that felt itself positively too agitated. Vanderbank had helped him on with the Inverness cape and for an instant detained him by it. "Just tell me as a kindness. Do we talk —"

"Too freely?" Mr. Longdon, with his clear eyes so untouched by time, speculatively murmured.

"Too outrageously. I want the truth."

The truth evidently for Mr. Longdon was difficult to tell. "Well — it was certainly different."

"From you and Lady Julia? I see. Well, of course with time *some* change is natural, is n't it? But so

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different," Vanderbank pressed, "that you were really shocked?"

His visitor smiled at this, but the smile somehow made the face graver. "I think I was rather frightened. Good-night."

BOOK SECOND

LITTLE AGGIE

I

MRS. BROOKENHAM stopped on the threshold with the sharp surprise of the sight of her son, and there was disappointment, though rather of the afflicted than of the irritated sort, in the question that, slowly advancing, she launched at him. "If you're still lolling about why did you tell me two hours ago that you were leaving immediately?"

Deep in a large brocaded chair with his little legs stuck out to the fire, he was so much at his ease that he was almost flat on his back. She had evidently roused him from sleep, and it took him a couple of minutes — during which, without again looking at him, she directly approached a beautiful old French secretary, a fine piece of the period of Louis Seize — to justify his presence. "I changed my mind. I could n't get off."

"Do you mean to say you're not going?"

"Well, I'm thinking it over. What's a fellow to do?" He sat up a little, staring with conscious solemnity at the fire, and if it had been — as it was not — one of the annoyances she in general expected from him, she might have received the impression that his flush was the heat of liquor.

"He's to keep out of the way," she returned — "when he has led one so deeply to hope it." There had been a bunch of keys dangling from the secretary, of which as she said these words Mrs. Brookenham

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her relation with Harold, yet she soon failed to resist a sufficiently poor reason for breaking it. "Be so good as to get out of my chair."

"What will you do for me," he asked, "if I oblige you?"

He never moved — but as if only the more directly and intimately to meet her — and she stood again before the fire and sounded his strange little face. "I don't know what it is, but you give me sometimes a kind of terror."

"A terror, mamma?"

She found another place, sinking sadly down and opening her book, and the next moment he got up and came over to kiss her, on which she drew her cheek wearily aside. "You bore me quite to death," she coldly said, "and I give you up to your fate."

"What do you call my fate?"

"Oh something dreadful — if only by its being publicly ridiculous." She turned vaguely the pages of her book. "You're too selfish — too sickening."

"Oh dear, dear!" he wonderingly whistled while he wandered back to the hearth-rug, on which, with his hands behind him, he lingered a while. He was small and had a slight stoop which somehow gave him character — character of the insidious sort carried out in the acuteness, difficult to trace to a source, of his smooth fair face, where the lines were all curves and the expression all needles. He had the voice of a man of forty and was dressed — as if markedly not for London — with an air of experience that seemed to match it. He pulled down his waistcoat, smoothing himself, feeling his neat hair and looking at his shoes.

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another rattled out a small drawer; after which she pushed the drawer back, closing the whole thing. "You terrify me — you terrify me," she again said.

"How can you say that when you showed me just now how well you know me? Was n't it just on account of what you thought I might do that you took out the keys as soon as you came in?" Harold's manner had a way of clearing up whenever he could talk of himself.

"You're too utterly disgusting — I shall speak to your father:" with which, going to the chair he had given up, his mother sank down again with her heavy book. There was no anger, however, in her voice, and not even a harsh plaint; only a detached accepted disenchantment. Mrs. Brookenham's supreme rebellion against fate was just to show with the last frankness how much she was bored.

"No, darling mummy, you won't speak to my father — you'll do anything in the world rather than that," Harold replied, quite as if he were kindly explaining her to herself. "I thank you immensely for the charming way you take what I've done; it was because I had a conviction of that that I waited for you to know it. It was all very well to tell you I'd start on my visit — but how the deuce was I to start without a penny in the world? Don't you see that if you want me to go about you must really enter into my needs?"

"I wish to heaven you'd leave me — I wish to heaven you'd get out of the house," Mrs. Brookenham went on without looking up.

Harold took out his watch. "Well, mamma, now

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the question. If on my note she did n't write — that's what I mean. Should one simply take it that one's wanted? I like to have these things *from* you, mother. I do, I believe, everything you say; but to feel safe and right I must just *have* them. Any one *would* want me, eh?"

Mrs. Brookenham had opened her eyes, but she still attached them to the cornice. "If she had n't wanted you she'd have written to keep you off. In a great house like that there's always room."

The young man watched her a moment. "How you *do* like to tuck us in and then sit up yourself! What do you want to do, anyway? What *are* you up to, mummy?"

She rose at this, turning her eyes about the room as if from the extremity of martyrdom or the wistfulness of some deep thought. Yet when she spoke it was with a different expression, an expression that would have served for an observer as a marked illustration of that disconnectedness of her parts which frequently was laughable even to the degree of contributing to her social success. "You've spent then more than four pounds in five days. It was on Friday I gave them to you. What in the world do you suppose is going to become of me?"

Harold continued to look at her as if the question demanded some answer really helpful. "Do we live beyond our means?"

She now moved her gaze to the floor. "Will you *please* get away?"

"Anything to assist you. Only, if I *should* find I'm not wanted —?"

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write — from Brander. It's the sort of thing for the Mangers. Or even wire."

"Both?" the young man laughed. "Oh you duck!" he cried. "And from where will *you* let them have it?"

"From Pewbury," she replied without wincing. "I'll write on Sunday."

"Good. How d'ye do, Duchess?" — and Harold, before he disappeared, greeted with a rapid concentration of all the shades of familiarity a large high lady, the visitor he had announced, who rose in the doorway with the manner of a person used to arriving on thresholds very much as people arrive at stations — with the expectation of being "met."

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height—! It matched for that matter her other elements, which were wontedly conspicuous as usual as she sat there suggestive of early tea. She always suggested tea before the hour, and her friend always, but with so different a wistfulness, rang for it. "Who's to be at Brander?" she asked.

"I have n't the least idea — he did n't tell me. But they've always a lot of people."

"Oh I know — extraordinary mixtures. Has he been there before?"

Mrs. Brookenham thought. "Oh yes — if I remember — more than once. In fact her note — which he showed me, but which only mentioned 'some friends' — was a sort of appeal on the ground of something or other that had happened the last time."

The Duchess dealt with it. "She writes the most extraordinary notes."

"Well, this was nice, I thought," Mrs. Brookenham said — "from a woman of her age and her immense position to so young a man."

Again the Duchess reflected. "My dear, she's not an American and she's not on the stage. Are n't those what you call positions in this country? And she's also not a hundred."

"Yes, but Harold's a mere baby."

"Then he does n't seem to want for nurses!" the Duchess replied. She smiled at her hostess. "Your children are like their mother — they're eternally young."

"Well, *I*'m not a hundred!" moaned Mrs. Brookenham as if she wished with dim perversity she were.

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to look as sweetly resigned as if she really saw what was in them. Where were they going for Easter? She had to think an instant, but she brought it out. "Oh to Pewbury — we've been engaged so long that I had forgotten. We go once a year — one does it for Edward."

"Ah you spoil him!" smiled the Duchess. "Who's to be there?"

"Oh the usual thing, I suppose. A lot of my lord's tiresome supporters."

"To pay his debt? Then why are you poor things asked?"

Mrs. Brookenham looked, on this, quite adorably — that is most wonderingly — grave. "How do I know, my dear Jane, why in the world we're ever asked anywhere? Fancy people wanting Edward!" she exhaled with stupefaction. "Yet we can never get off Pewbury."

"You're better for getting on, *cara mia*, than for getting off!" the Duchess blandly returned. She was a person of no small presence, filling her place, however, without ponderosity, with a massiveness indeed rather artfully kept in bounds. Her head, her chin, her shoulders were well aloft, but she had not abandoned the cultivation of a "figure" or any of the distinctively finer reasons for passing as a handsome woman. She was secretly at war moreover, in this endeavour, with a lurking no less than with a public foe, and thoroughly aware that if she did n't look well she might at times only, and quite dreadfully, look good. There were definite ways of escape, none of which she neglected and from the total of which, as

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association. It would be in the natural order certainly" — in spite of which natural order the Duchess made the point with but moderate emphasis — "that, since dear Edward is my cousin, Aggie should see at least as much of Nanda as of any other girl of their age. But what will you have? I must recognise the predicament I'm placed in by the more and more extraordinary development of English manners. Many things have altered, goodness knows, since I was Aggie's age, but nothing's so different as what you all do with your girls. It's all a muddle, a compromise, a monstrosity, like everything else you produce; there's nothing in it that goes on all-fours. *I* see but one consistent way, which is our fine old foreign way and which makes — in the upper classes, mind you, for it's with them only I'm concerned — *des femmes bien gracieuses*. I allude to the immemorial custom of my husband's race, which was good enough for his mother and his mother's mother, for Aggie's own, for his other sisters, for *toutes ces dames*. It would have been good enough for my child, as I call her — my dear husband called her *his* — if, not losing her parents, she had remained in her own country. She would have been brought up there under an anxious eye — that's the great point; privately, carefully, tenderly, and with what she was *not* to learn — till the proper time — looked after quite as much as the rest. I can only go on with her in that spirit and make of her, under Providence, what I consider any young person of her condition, of her name, of her particular traditions, should be. *Voilà, ma chère*. Should you put it to me whether

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to take up, you know, some of the things you say —!" And she positively sighed for the wealth of amusement at them of which her tears were the sign.

Her friend could quite match her indifference. "Well, my child, *take* them up; if you were to do that with them candidly, one by one, you would do really very much what I should like to bring you to. Do you see?" Mrs. Brookenham's failure to repudiate the vision appeared to suffice, and her visitor cheerfully took a further jump. "As much of Tishy as she wants — *after*. But not before."

"After what?"

"Well — say after Mr. Mitchett. Mr. Mitchett won't take her after Mrs. Grendon."

"And what are your grounds for assuming that he'll take her at all?" Then as the Duchess hung fire a moment: "Have you got it by chance from Lord Petherton?"

The eyes of the two women met for a little on this, and there might have been a consequence of it in the manner of what came. "I've got it from not being a fool. Men, I repeat, like the girls they marry —"

"Oh I already know your old song! The way they like the girls they *don't* marry seems to be," Mrs. Brookenham mused, "what more immediately concerns us. You had better wait till you *have* made Aggie's fortune perhaps — to be so sure of the working of your system. Pardon me, darling, if I don't take you for an example until you've a little more successfully become one. I know what the sort of men worth speaking of are not looking for. They *are* looking for smart safe sensible English girls."

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ninepence." And the Duchess got up — shining, however, with a confessed light of fantasy. "Speak to him, my dear — speak to him!"

"Do you mean offer him my child?"

She laughed at the intonation. "There you are once more — *vous autres!* If you're shocked at the idea you place *drôlement* your delicacy. I'd offer mine to the son of a chimney-sweep if the principal guarantees were there. Nanda's charming — you don't do her justice. I don't say Mr. Mitchett's either beautiful or noble, and he certainly has n't as much distinction as would cover the point of a pin. He does n't mind moreover what he says — the lengths he sometimes goes to! — but that," added the Duchess with decision, "is no doubt much a matter of how he finds you'll take it. And after marriage what does it signify? He has forty thousand a year, an excellent idea of how to take care of it and a good disposition."

Mrs. Brookenham sat still; she only looked up at her friend. "Is it by Lord Petherton that you know of his excellent idea?"

The Duchess showed she was challenged, but also that she made allowances. "I go by my impression. But Lord Petherton *has* spoken for him."

"He ought to do that," said Mrs. Brookenham — "since he wholly lives on him."

"Lord Petherton — on Mr. Mitchett?" The Duchess stared, but rather in amusement than in horror. "Why, has n't he a — property?"

"The loveliest. Mr. Mitchett's his property. Didn't you *know?*" There was an artless wail in Mrs. Brookenham's surprise.

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servant had arrived to open for her, and Mrs. Brookenham still at her tea-table — a further stroke of intercourse, over which the latter was not on this occasion the first to lower her lids. “I think I’ve shown high scruples,” the departing guest said, “but I understand then that I’m free.”

“Free as air, dear Jane.”

“Good.” Then just as she was off, “Ah dear old Edward!” the guest exclaimed. Her kinsman, as she was fond of calling him, had reached the top of the staircase, and Mrs. Brookenham, by the fire, heard them meet on the landing — heard also the Duchess protest against his turning to see her down. Mrs. Brookenham, listening to them, hoped Edward would accept the protest and think it sufficient to leave her with the footman. Their common consciousness that she was a kind of cousin, a consciousness not devoid of satisfaction, was quite consistent with a view, early arrived at, of the absurdity of any fuss about her.

III

WHEN Mr. Brookenham appeared his wife was prompt. "She's coming back for Lord Petherton."

"Oh!" he simply said.

"There's something between them."

"Oh!" he merely repeated. And it would have taken many such sounds on his part to represent a spirit of response discernible to any one but his mate.

"There have been things before," she went on, "but I have n't felt sure. Don't you know how one has sometimes a flash?"

It could n't be said of Edward Brookenham, who seemed to bend for sitting down more hinges than most men, that he looked as if he knew either this or anything else. He had a pale cold face, marked and made regular, made even in a manner handsome, by a hardness of line in which, oddly, there was no significance, no accent. Clean-shaven, slightly bald, with unlighted grey eyes and a mouth that gave the impression of not working easily, he suggested a stippled drawing by an inferior master. Lean moreover and stiff, and with the air of having here and there in his person a bone or two more than his share, he had once or twice, at fancy-balls, been thought striking in a dress copied from one of Holbein's English portraits. But when once some such meaning as that had been put into him it took a long time to put another, a longer time than even his extreme exposure

LITTLE AGGIE

"With our children — with our home life. She's awfully down on Tishy."

"Tishy?" — Edward appeared for a moment at a loss.

"Tishy Grendon — and her craze for Nanda."

"Has she a craze for Nanda?"

"Surely I told you Nanda's to be with her for Easter."

"I believe you did," he bethought himself, "but you did n't say anything about a craze. And where's Harold?" he went on.

"He's at Brander. That is he will be by dinner. He has just gone."

"And how does he get there?"

"Why by the South-Western. They'll send to meet him."

Brookenham appeared for a moment to view this statement in the dry light of experience. "They'll only send if there are others too."

"Of course then there'll be others — lots. The more the better for Harold."

This young man's father was silent a little. "Perhaps — if they don't play high."

"Ah," said his mother, "however Harold plays he has a way of winning."

"He has a way too of being a hopeless ass. What I meant was how he comes there at all," Edward explained.

"Why as any one comes — by being invited. She wrote to him — weeks ago."

Brookenham just traceably took this in, but to what profit was not calculable. "To Harold? Very

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hour before, at the dreary rain and the now duskier ugliness. He reverted in this attitude, with a complete unconsciousness of making for irritation, to an issue they might be supposed to have dropped. "He'll have a lovely drive for his money!" His companion, however, said nothing and he presently came round again. "No, I'm not absolutely sure — of his having had it from Mitchy. If I were I should do something."

"What would you do?" She put it as if she could n't possibly imagine.

"I'd speak to him."

"To Harold?"

"No — that might just put it into his head." Brookenham walked up and down a little with his hands in his pockets, after which, with a complete concealment of the steps of the transition, "Where are we dining to-night?" he brought out.

"Nowhere, thank heaven. We grace our own board."

"Oh — with those fellows, as you said, and Jane?"

"That's not for dinner. The Baggers and Mary Pinthorpe and — upon my word I forget."

"You'll see when she comes," suggested Brookenham, who was again at the window.

"It is n't a she — it's two or three he's, I think," his wife replied with her indifferent anxiety. "But I don't know what dinner it is," she bethought herself; "it may be the one that's after Easter. Then that one's this one," she added with her eyes once more on her book.

"Well, it's a relief to dine at home" — and Brook-

THE AWKWARD AGE

enham faced about. "Would you mind finding out?" he asked with some abruptness.

"Do you mean who's to dine?"

"No, that does n't matter. But whether Mitchy *has* come down."

"I can only find out by asking him."

"Oh *I* could ask him." He seemed disappointed at his wife's want of resource.

"And you don't want to?"

He looked coldly, from before the fire, over the prettiness of her brown bent head. "It will be such a beastly bore if he admits it."

"And you think poor I can make him not admit it?" She put the question as if it were really her own thought too, but they were a couple who could, even face to face and unlike the augurs behind the altar, think these things without laughing. "If he *should* admit it," Mrs. Brookenham threw in, "will you give me the money?"

"The money?"

"To pay Mitchy back."

She had now raised her eyes to her husband, but, turning away, he failed to meet them. "He'll deny it."

"Well, if they all deny it," she presently remarked, "it's a simple enough matter. I'm sure *I* don't want them to come down on us! But that's the advantage," she almost prattled on, "of having so many such charming friends. They *don't* come down."

This again was a remark of a sweep that there appeared to be nothing in Brookenham's mind to match; so that, scarcely pausing in the walk he had

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resumed, he only said: "Who do you mean by 'all'?"

"Why if he has had anything from Mitchy I dare say he has had something from Van."

"Oh!" Brookenham returned as if with a still deeper drop of interest.

"They ought n't to do it," she declared; "they ought to tell us, and when they don't it serves them right." Even this observation, however, failed to rouse in her husband a response, and, as she had quite formed the habit of doing, she philosophically answered herself. "But I don't suppose they do it on spec."

It was less apparent than ever what Edward supposed. "Oh Van has n't money to chuck about."

"Ah I only mean a sovereign here and there."

"Well," Brookenham threw out after another turn, "I think Van, you know, is your affair."

"It *all* seems to be my affair!" she lamented too woefully to have other than a comic effect. "And of course then it will be still more so if he should begin to apply to Mr. Longdon."

"We must stop that in time."

"Do you mean by warning Mr. Longdon and requesting him immediately to tell us? That won't be very pleasant," Mrs. Brookenham noted.

"Well then wait and see."

She waited only a minute — it might have appeared she already saw. "I want him to be kind to Harold and can't help thinking he will."

"Yes, but I fancy that that will be his notion of it — keeping him from making debts. I dare say one

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before himself. "And will he — on account of your mother — also like *me*?"

She weighed it. "No, Edward." She covered him with her loveliest expression. "No, not really either. But it won't make any difference." This time she had pulled him up.

"Not if he does n't like Harold or like you or like me?" Edward clearly found himself able to accept only the premise.

"He'll be perfectly loyal. It will be the advantage of mamma!" Mrs. Brookenham cried. "Mamma, Edward," she brought out with a flash of solemnity — "mamma *was* wonderful. There have been times when I've always felt her still with us, but Mr. Longdon makes it somehow so real. Whether she's with me or not, at any rate, she's with *him*; so that when *he*'s with me, don't you see —?"

"It comes to the same thing?" her husband intelligently asked. "I see. And when was he with you last?"

"Not since the day he dined — but that was only last week. He'll come soon — I know from Van."

"And what does Van know?"

"Oh all sorts of things. He has taken the greatest fancy to him."

"The old boy — to Van?"

"Van to Mr. Longdon. And the other way too. Mr. Longdon has been most kind to him."

Brookenham still moved about. "Well, if he likes Van and does n't like *us*, what good will that do us?"

"You'd understand soon enough if you felt Van's loyalty."

IV

LORD PETHERTON, a man of five-and-thirty, whose robust but symmetrical proportions gave to his dark blue double-breasted coat an air of tightness that just failed of compromising his tailor, had for his main facial sign a certain pleasant brutality, the effect partly of a bold handsome parade of carnivorous teeth, partly of an expression of nose suggesting that this feature had paid a little, in the heat of youth, for some aggression at the time admired and even publicly commemorated. He would have been ugly, he substantively granted, had he not been happy; he would have been dangerous had he not been warranted. Many things doubtless performed for him this last service, but none so much as the delightful sound of his voice, the voice, as it were, of another man, a nature reclaimed, supercivilised, adjusted to the perpetual "chaff" which kept him smiling in a way that would have been a mistake and indeed an impossibility if he had really been witty. His bright familiarity was that of a young prince whose confidence had never had to falter, and the only thing that at all qualified the resemblance was the equal familiarity excited in his subjects.

Mr. Mitchett had so little intrinsic appearance that an observer would have felt indebted for help in placing him to the rare prominence of his colourless eyes and the positive attention drawn to his chin by

LITTLE AGGIE

oftener than I succeed in pulling you. I must say," Mrs. Brookenham went on, "you're all getting to require among you in general an amount of what one may call editing!" She gave one of her droll universal sighs. "I've got your books at any rate locked up and I wish you'd send for them quickly again; one's too nervous about anything happening and their being perhaps found among one's relics. Charming literary remains!" she laughed.

The friendly Mitchy was also much amused. "By Jove, the most awful things *are* found! Have you heard about old Randage and what his executors have just come across? The most abominable —"

"I have n't heard," she broke in, "and I don't want to; but you give me a shudder and I beg you'll have your offerings removed, since I can't think of confiding them for the purpose to any one in this house. I might burn them up in the dead of night, but even then I should be fearfully nervous."

"I'll send then my usual messenger," said Mitchy, "a person I keep for such jobs, thoroughly seasoned, as you may imagine, and of a discretion — what do you call it? — *à toute épreuve*. Only you must let me say that I like your terror about Harold! Do you think he spends his time over Dr. Watts's hymns?"

Mrs. Brookenham just hesitated, and nothing, in general, was so becoming to her as the act of hesitation. "Dear Mitchy, do you know I want awfully to talk to you about Harold?"

"About his French reading, Mrs. Brook?" Mitchy responded with interest. "The worse things are, let me just mention to you about that, the better they

LITTLE AGGIE

made the quickest of transitions. "What *is* there between her and him?"

Mitchy wondered at the other two. "Between Edward and the girl?"

"Don't talk nonsense. Between Petherton and Jane."

Mitchy could only stare, and the wide noonday light of his regard was at such moments really the redemption of his ugliness. "What '*is*' there? Is there anything?"

"It's too beautiful," Mrs. Brookenham appreciatively sighed, "your relation with him! You won't compromise him."

"It would be nicer of me," Mitchy laughed, "not to want to compromise *her*."

"Oh Jane!" Mrs. Brookenham dropped. "*Does* he like her?" she continued. "You must know."

"Ah it's just my knowing that constitutes the beauty of my loyalty — of my delicacy." He had his quick jumps too. "Am I never, never to see the child?"

This enquiry appeared only to confirm his friend in the view of what was touching in him. "You're the most delicate thing I know, and it crops up with effect the oddest in the intervals of your corruption. Your talk's half the time impossible; you respect neither age nor sex nor condition; one does n't know what you'll say or do next; and one has to return your books — *c'est tout dire* — under cover of darkness. Yet there's in the midst of all this and in the general abyss of you a little deepdown delicious niceness, a sweet sensibility, that one has actually one's self,

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vulgar. He is n't vulgar himself — at least not exceptionally; but he's just one of those people, a class one knows well, who are so fearfully, in this country, the cause of it in others. For all I know he's the cause of it in me — the cause of it even in poor Edward. For *I'm* vulgar, Mitchy dear — very often; and the marvel of you is that you never are."

"Thank you for everything. Thank you above all for 'marvel'!" Mitchy grinned.

"Oh I know what I say!" — she did n't in the least blush. "I'll tell you something," she pursued with the same gravity, "if you'll promise to tell no one on earth. If you're proud I'm not. There! It's most extraordinary and I try to conceal it even to myself; but there's no doubt whatever about it — I'm not proud *pour deux sous*. And some day, on some awful occasion, I shall show it. So — I notify you. Shall you love me still?"

"To the bitter end," Mitchy loyally responded. "For how *can*, how need, a woman be 'proud' who's so preternaturally clever? Pride's only for use when wit breaks down — it's the train the cyclist takes when his tire's deflated. When that happens to *your* tire, Mrs. Brook, you'll let me know. And you do make me wonder just now," he confessed, "why you're taking such particular precautions and throwing out such a cloud of skirmishers. If you want to shoot me dead a single bullet will do." He faltered but an instant before completing his sense. "Where you really want to come out is at the fact that Nanda loathes me and that I might as well give up asking for her."

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woman," Mitchy asked, "mention such trifles as having the least to do with the case? How can you possibly have such a fellow about, so beastly good-looking, so infernally well turned out in the way of 'culture,' and so bringing them down in short on every side, and expect in the bosom of your family the absence of history of the reigns of the good kings? If *you* were a girl would n't *you* turn purple? If I were a girl should n't I — unless, as is more likely, I turned green?"

Mrs. Brookenham was deeply affected. "Nanda does turn purple —?"

"The loveliest shade you ever saw. It's too absurd that you have n't noticed."

It was characteristic of Mrs. Brookenham's amiability that, with her sudden sense of the importance of this new light, she should be quite ready to abase herself. "There are so many things in one's life. One follows false scents. One does n't make out everything at once. If you're right you must help me. We must see more of her."

"But what good will that do me?" Mitchy appealed.

"Don't you care enough for her to want to help *her*?" Then before he could speak, "Poor little darling dear!" his hostess tenderly ejaculated. "What does she think or dream? Truly she's laying up treasure!"

"Oh he likes her," said Mitchy. "He likes her in fact extremely."

"Do you mean he has told you so?"

"Oh no — we never mention it! But he likes her,"

LITTLE AGGIE

flush. "Magnificent, magnificent Mrs. Brook! What *are* you in thunder up to?"

"Therefore, as I say," she imperturbably went on, "it's not to do him an ill turn that you make a point of what you've just told me."

Mr. Mitchett for a minute gave no sign but his high colour and his queer glare. "How could it do him an ill turn?"

"Oh it *would* be a way, don't you see? to put before me the need of getting rid of him. For he may 'like' Nanda as much as you please: he'll never, never," Mrs. Brookenham resolutely quavered — "he'll never come to the scratch. And to feel that as *I* do," she explained, "can only be, don't you also see? to want to save her."

It would have appeared at last that poor Mitchy did see. "By taking it in time? By forbidding him the house?"

She seemed to stand with little nipping scissors in a garden of alternatives. "Or by shipping *her* off. Will you help me to save her?" she broke out again after a moment. "It is n't true," she continued, "that she has any aversion to you."

"Have you charged her with it?" Mitchy demanded with a courage that amounted to high gallantry.

It inspired on the spot his interlocutress, and her own pluck, of as fine a quality now as her diplomacy, which was saying much, fell but little below. "Yes, my dear friend — frankly."

"Good. Then I know what she said."

"She absolutely denied it."

"Oh yes — they always do, because they pity me,"

V

THAT young lady, in this relation, was certainly a figure to have offered a foundation for the highest hopes. As slight and white, as delicately lovely, as a gathered garden lily, her admirable training appeared to hold her out to them all as with precautionary finger-tips. She presumed, however, so little on any introduction that, shyly and submissively, waiting for the word of direction, she stopped short in the centre of the general friendliness till Mrs. Brookenham fairly became, to meet her, also a shy little girl — put out a timid hand with wonder-struck innocent eyes that hesitated whether a kiss of greeting might be dared. “Why you dear good strange ‘ickie’ thing, you have n’t been here for ages, but it *is* a joy to see you and I do hope you’ve brought your doll!” — such might have been the sense of our friend’s fond murmur while, looking at her up and down with pure pleasure, she drew the rare creature to a sofa. Little Aggie presented, up and down, an arrangement of dress exactly in the key of her age, her complexion, her emphasised virginity. She might have been prepared for her visit by a cluster of doting nuns, cloistered daughters of ancient houses and educators of similar products, whose taste, hereditarily good, had grown, out of the world and most delightfully, so queer as to leave on everything they touched a particular shade of distinction. The Duchess had brought in

LITTLE AGGIE

know it and without particularly meaning it. But old Edward means it —”

“So much that as a general thing he does n’t dare to say it?” the Duchess asked. “That’s a pretty picture of him, inasmuch as for the most part he never speaks. What therefore must he mean?”

“He’s an abyss — he’s magnificent!” Mr. Mitchett laughed. “I don’t know a man of an understanding more profound, and he’s equally incapable of uttering and of wincing. If by the same token I’m ‘horrible,’ as you call me,” he pursued, “it’s only because I’m in every way so beastly superficial. All the same I do sometimes go into things, and I insist on knowing,” he again broke out, “what it exactly was you had in mind in saying to Mrs. Brook the things about Nanda and myself that she repeated to me.”

“You ‘insist,’ you silly man?” — the Duchess had veered a little to indulgence. “Pray on what ground of right, in such a connexion, do you do anything of the sort?”

Poor Mitchy showed but for a moment that he felt pulled up. “Do you mean that when a girl liked by a fellow likes him so little in return —?”

“I don’t mean anything,” said the Duchess, “that may provoke you to suppose me vulgar and odious enough to try to put you out of conceit of a most interesting and unfortunate creature; and I don’t quite as yet see — though I dare say I shall soon make out! — what our friend has in her head in tattling to you on these matters as soon as my back’s turned. Petherton will tell you — I wonder he has n’t

LITTLE AGGIE

The Duchess, as on everything else, passed succinctly on this. "Ah how can hatreds comfortably flourish without the nourishment of such regular 'seeing' as what you call here bosom friendship alone supplies? What are parties given for in London but that enemies may meet? I grant you it's inconceivable that the husband of a superb creature like your sister should find his requirements better met by an object *comme cette petite*, who looks like a pen-wiper — an actress's idea of one — made up for a theatrical bazaar. At the same time, if you'll allow me to say so, it scarcely strikes one that your sister's prudence is such as to have placed all the cards in her hands. She's the most beautiful woman in England, but her *esprit de conduite* is n't quite on a level. One can't have everything!" she philosophically sighed.

Lord Petherton met her comfortably enough on this assumption of his detachments. "If you mean by that her being the biggest fool alive I'm quite ready to agree with you. It's exactly what makes me afraid. Yet how can I decently say in especial," he asked, "of what?"

The Duchess still perched on her critical height. "Of what but one of your amazing English periodical public washings of dirty linen? There's not the least necessity to 'say'!" she laughed. "If there's anything more remarkable than these purifications it's the domestic comfort with which, when all has come and gone, you sport the articles purified."

"It comes back, in all that sphere," Mr. Mitchett instructively opined, "to our national, our fatal want of style. We can never, dear Duchess, take too many

LITTLE AGGIE

“And the beauty of it is,” cried Lord Petherton, “that she makes no charge whatever!”

“She does n’t take a guinea at the time, but you may still get your account,” the Duchess returned. “Of course we know that the great business she does is in husbands and wives.”

“This then seems the day of the wives!” Mr. Mitchett interposed as he became aware, the first, of the illustration the Duchess’s image was in the act of receiving. “Lady Fanny Cashmore!” — the butler was already in the field, and the company, with the exception of Mrs. Donner, who remained seated, was apparently conscious of a vibration that brought it afresh, but still more nimbly than on Aggie’s advent, to its feet.

LITTLE AGGIE

"How low you are!" she simply said. "There are times when I despair of you. He's in every way your superior, and I like him so that — well, he must like *her*. Make him feel that he does."

Lord Petherton turned it over as something put to him practically. "I could wish for him that he would. I see in her possibilities —!" he continued to laugh.

"I dare say you do. *I* see them in Mitchett, and I trust you'll understand me when I say I appeal to you."

"Appeal to *him* straight. That's much better," Petherton lucidly observed.

The Duchess wore for a moment her proudest air, which made her, in the connexion, exceptionally gentle. "He does n't like me."

Her interlocutor looked at her with all his bright brutality. "Oh my dear, I can speak for you — if *that's* what you want!"

The Duchess met his eyes, and so for an instant they sounded each other. "You're so abysmally coarse that I often wonder —!" But as the door reopened she caught herself. It was the effect of a face apparently directed at her. "Be quiet. Here's old Edward."

BOOK THIRD

MR. LONGDON

I

IF Mitchy arrived exactly at the hour it was quite by design and on a calculation — over and above the prized little pleasure it might give him — of ten minutes clear with his host, whom it rarely befell him to see alone. He had a theory of something special to go into, of a plummet to sink or a feeler to put forth; his state of mind in short was diplomatic and anxious. But his hopes had a drop as he crossed the threshold. His precaution had only assured him the company of a stranger, for the person in the room to whom the servant announced him was not old Van. On the other hand this gentleman would clearly be old — what was it? the fellow Vanderbank had made it a matter of such importance he should “really know.” But were they then simply to have tea there together? No; the candidate for Mr. Mitchett’s acquaintance, as if quickly guessing his apprehension, mentioned on the spot that their entertainer would be with them: he had just come home in a hurry, fearing he was late, and then had rushed off to make a change. “Fortunately,” said the speaker, who offered his explanation as if he had had it on his mind — “fortunately the ladies have n’t yet come.”

“Oh there *are* to be ladies?” — Mr. Mitchett was all response.

His fellow guest, who was shy and apparently nervous, sidled about a little, swinging an eye-glass,

MR. LONGDON

"Oh strike out!" Mitchy laughed. It possibly chilled his interlocutor, who again hung fire so long that he himself at last adopted his image. "Why does n't he marry, you mean?"

Mr. Longdon fairly flushed with recognition. "You're very deep, but with what we perceive — why does n't he?"

Mitchy continued visibly to have his amusement, which might have been, this time and in spite of the amalgamation he had pictured, for what "they" perceived. But he threw off after an instant an answer clearly intended to meet the case. "He thinks he has n't the means. He has great ideas of what a fellow must offer a woman."

Mr. Longdon's eyes travelled a while over the amenities about him. "He has n't such a view of himself alone —?"

"As to make him think he's enough as he stands? No," said Mitchy, "I don't fancy he has a very awful view of himself alone. And since we *are* burning this incense under his nose," he added, "it's also my impression that he has no private means. Women in London cost so much."

Mr. Longdon had a pause. "They come very high, I dare say."

"Oh tremendously. They want so much — they want everything. I mean the sort of women he lives with. A modest man — who's also poor — is n't in it. I give you that at any rate as his view. There are lots of them that would — and only too glad — 'love him for himself'; but things are much mixed, and these not necessarily the right ones, and at all events

MR. LONGDON

“Why,” said the stimulated Mitchy, “do, for God’s sake, just let me have a finger in it.”

Mr. Longdon’s momentary mystification was perhaps partly but the natural effect of constitutional prudence. “A finger?”

“I mean — let me help.”

“Oh!” breathed the old man thoughtfully and without meeting his eyes.

Mitchy, as if with more to say, watched him an instant, then before speaking caught himself up. “Look out — here he comes.”

Hearing the stir of the door by which he had entered he looked round; but it opened at first only to admit Vanderbank’s servant. “Miss Brookenham!” the man announced; on which the two gentlemen in the room were — audibly, almost violently — precipitated into a union of surprise.

MR. LONGDON

light. "Will she understand? She has everything in the world but one," he added. "But that's half."

Vanderbank, before him, lighted for himself. "What is it?"

"A sense of humour."

"Oh yes, she's serious."

Mitchy smoked a little. "She's tragic."

His friend, at the fire, watched a moment the empty portion of the other room, then walked across to give the door a light push that all but closed it. "It's rather odd," he remarked as he came back — "that's quite what I just said to him. But he won't treat her to comedy."

MR. LONGDON

"My dear child!" he at last simply murmured. But he laid his hand on her now, and her own immediately met it.

"You'll get used to me," she said with the same gentleness that the response of her touch had tried to express; "and I shall be so careful with you that — well, you'll see!" She broke short off with a quaver and the next instant she turned — there was some one at the door. Vanderbank, still not quite at his ease, had come back to smile upon them. Detaching herself from Mr. Longdon she got straight up to meet him. "You were right, Mr. Van. It's beautiful, beautiful, beautiful!"

BOOK FOURTH

MR. CASHMORE

I

HAROLD BROOKENHAM, whom Mr. Cashmore, ushered in and announced, had found in the act of helping himself to a cup of tea at the table apparently just prepared — Harold Brookenham arrived at the point with a dash so direct as to leave the visitor an option between but two suppositions: that of a desperate plunge, to have his shame soon over, or that of the acquired habit of such appeals, which had taught him the easiest way. There was no great sharpness in the face of Mr. Cashmore, who was somehow massive without majesty; yet he might n't have been proof against the suspicion that his young friend's embarrassment was an easy precaution, a conscious corrective to the danger of audacity. It would n't have been impossible to divine that if Harold shut his eyes and jumped it was mainly for the appearance of doing so. Experience was to be taken as showing that one might get a five-pound note as one got a light for a cigarette; but one had to check the friendly impulse to ask for it in the same way. Mr. Cashmore had in fact looked surprised, yet not on the whole so surprised as the young man seemed to have expected of him. There was almost a quiet grace in the combination of promptitude and diffidence with which Harold took over the responsibility of all proprietorship of the crisp morsel of paper that he slipped with slow firmness into the pocket of his waistcoat, rubbing it gently

MR. CASHMORE

“Do you wish to break it to me that you’re in love with Nanda?”

He hesitated, but only as if to give weight to his reply. “Awfully. I can’t tell you how I like her.”

She wondered. “And pray how will *that* help me? Help me, I mean, to help you. Is it what I’m to tell your wife?”

He sat looking away, but he evidently had his idea, which he at last produced. “Why would n’t it be just the thing? It would exactly prove my purity.”

There might have been in her momentary silence a hint of acceptance of it as a practical contribution to their problem, and there were indeed several lights in which it could be considered. Mrs. Brook, on a quick survey, selected the ironic. “I see, I see. I might by the same law arrange somehow that Lady Fanny should find herself in love with Edward. That would ‘prove’ *her* purity. And you could be quite at ease,” she laughed — “he would n’t make any presents!”

Mr. Cashmore regarded her with a candour that was almost a reproach to her mirth. “I like your daughter better than I like you.”

But it only amused her more. “Is that perhaps because *I* don’t prove your purity?”

What he might have replied remained in the air, for the door opened so exactly at the moment she spoke that he rose again with a start and the butler, coming in, received her enquiry full in the face. This functionary’s answer to it, however, had no more than the usual austerity. “Mr. Vanderbank and Mr. Longdon.”

These visitors took a minute to appear, and Mrs.

II

MRS. BROOKENHAM, who had introduced him to the elder of her visitors, had also found, in serving these gentlemen with tea, a chance to edge at him with an intensity not to be resisted: "Talk to Mr. Longdon — take him off *there*." She had indicated the sofa at the opposite end of the room and had set him an example by possessing herself, in the place she already occupied, of her "adored" Vanderbank. This arrangement, however, constituted for her, in her own corner, as soon as she had made it, the ground of an appeal. "Will he hate me any worse for doing that?"

Vanderbank glanced at the others. "Will Cashmore, do you mean?"

"Dear no — I don't care whom *he* hates. But with Mr. Longdon I want to avoid mistakes."

"Then don't try quite so hard!" Vanderbank laughed. "Is that your reason for throwing him into Cashmore's arms?"

"Yes, precisely — so that I shall have these few moments to ask you for directions: you must know him by this time so well. I only want, heaven help me, to be as nice to him as I possibly can."

"That's quite the best thing for you and altogether why, this afternoon, I brought him: he might have better luck in finding you — it was he who suggested it — than he has had by himself. I'm in a general way," Vanderbank added, "watching over him."

MR. CASHMORE

She makes him feel," she went on, "so innocent and good."

Her companion for a moment said nothing; but then at last: "And *will* she come in?"

"I have n't the least idea."

"Don't you know where she is?"

"I suppose she's with Tishy, who has returned to town."

Vanderbank turned this over. "Is that your system now — to ask no questions?"

"Why *should* I ask any — when I want her life to be as much as possible like my own? It's simply that the hour has struck, as you know. From the moment she *is* down the only thing for us is to live as friends. I think it's so vulgar," Mrs. Brook sighed, "not to have the same good manners with one's children as one has with other people. She asks *me* nothing."

"Nothing?" Vanderbank echoed.

"Nothing."

He paused again; after which, "It's very disgusting!" he declared. Then while she took it up as he had taken her word of a moment before, "It's very preposterous," he continued.

Mrs. Brook appeared at a loss. "Do you mean her helping him?"

"It's not of Nanda I'm speaking — it's of him." Vanderbank spoke with a certain impatience. "His being with her in any sort of direct relation at all. His mixing her up with his other beastly affairs."

Mrs. Brook looked intelligent and wan about it, but also perfectly good-humoured. "My dear man, he and his affairs *are* such twaddle!"

MR. CASHMORE

"Is n't he rather rich?" She allowed the question all its effect of abruptness.

Vanderbank looked round at her. "Mr. Longdon? I have n't the least idea."

"Not after becoming so intimate? It's usually, with people, the very first thing I get my impression of." There came into her face for another glance at their friend no crudity of curiosity, but an expression more tenderly wistful. "He must have some mysterious box under his bed."

"Down in Suffolk? — a miser's hoard? Who knows? I dare say," Vanderbank went on. "He is n't a miser, but he strikes me as careful."

Mrs. Brook meanwhile had thought it out. "Then he has something to be careful of; it would take something really handsome to inspire in a man like him that sort of interest. With his small expenses all these years his savings must be immense. And how could he have proposed to mamma unless he had originally had money?"

If Vanderbank a little helplessly wondered he also laughed. "You must remember your mother refused him."

"Ah but not because there was n't enough."

"No — I imagine the force of the blow for him was just in the other reason."

"Well, it would have been in that one just as much if that one had been the other." Mrs. Brook was sagacious, though a trifle obscure, and she pursued the next moment: "Mamma was so sincere. The fortune was nothing to her. That shows it was immense."

MR. CASHMORE

These remarks were followed on either side by the repetition of a somewhat intenser mutual gaze, though indeed the speaker's eyes had more the air of meeting his friend's than of seeking them. "I can't be *you* certainly, Van," Mrs. Brook sadly brought forth.

"I know what you mean by that," he rejoined in a moment. "You mean I'm hypocritical."

"Hypocritical?"

"I'm diplomatic and calculating — I don't show him how bad I am; whereas with you he knows the worst."

Of this observation Mrs. Brook, whose eyes attached themselves again to Mr. Longdon, took at first no further notice than might have been indicated by the way it set her musing. "'Calculating'?" — she at last took him up. "On what is there to calculate?"

"Why," said Vanderbank, "if, as you just hinted, he's a blessing in disguise —! I perfectly admit," he resumed, "that I'm capable of sacrifices to keep on good terms with him."

"You're not afraid he'll bore you?"

"Oh yes — distinctly."

"But he'll be worth it? Then," Mrs. Brook said as he appeared to assent, "he'll be worth a great deal." She continued to watch Mr. Longdon, who, without his glasses, stared straight at the floor while Mr. Cashmore talked to him. She pursued, however, dispassionately enough: "He must be of a narrowness —!"

"Oh beautiful!"

She was silent again. "I shall broaden him. *You* won't."

MR. CASHMORE

a brighter light. "He might have been my *own* father! Besides," she went on, "if his line is to love the mothers why on earth does n't he love *me*? I'm in all conscience enough of one."

"Ah but is n't there in your case the fact of a daughter?" Vanderbank asked with a slight embarrassment.

Mrs. Brookenham stared. "What good does that do me?"

"Why, did n't she tell you?"

"Nanda? She told me he does n't like her any better than he likes me."

Vanderbank in his turn showed surprise. "That's really what she said?"

"She had on her return from your rooms a most unusual fit of frankness, for she generally tells me nothing."

"Well," said Vanderbank, "how did she put it?"

Mrs. Brook reflected — recovered it. "'I like him awfully, but I'm not in the least *his* idea.'"

"His idea of what?"

"That's just what I asked her. Of the proper grandchild for mamma."

Vanderbank hesitated. "Well, she is n't." Then after another pause: "But she'll do."

His companion gave him a deep look. "You'll make her?"

He got up, and on seeing him move Mr. Longdon also rose, so that, facing each other across the room, they exchanged a friendly signal or two. "I'll make her."

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bank kindly replied, "the best way to make sure of it would perhaps indeed be to remove you. But had n't we a hope of Nanda?"

"It might be of use for us to wait for her?" — it was still to his young friend that Mr. Longdon put it.

"Ah when she's once on the loose —!" Mrs. Brookenham sighed. "Unless *la voilà*," she said as a hand was heard at the door-latch. It was only, however, a footman who entered with a little tray that, on his approaching his mistress, offered to sight the brown envelope of a telegram. She immediately took leave to open this missive, after the quick perusal of which she had another vision of them all. "It is she — the modern daughter. 'Tishy keeps me dinner and opera; clothes all right; return uncertain, but if before morning have latch-key.' She won't come home till morning!" said Mrs. Brook.

"But think of the comfort of the latch-key!" Vanderbank laughed. "You might go to the opera," he said to Mr. Longdon.

"Hanged if I don't!" Mr. Cashmore exclaimed.

Mr. Longdon appeared to have caught from Nanda's message an obscure agitation; he met his young friend's suggestion at all events with a visible intensity. "Will you go with me?"

Vanderbank had just debated, recalling engagements; which gave Mrs. Brook time to intervene. "Can't you live without him?" she asked of her elder friend.

Vanderbank had looked at her an instant. "I think I can get there late," he then replied to Mr. Longdon.

THE AWKWARD AGE

"I think *I* can get there early," Mr. Cashmore declared. "Mrs. Grendon must have a box; in fact I know which, and *they* don't," he jocosely continued to his hostess.

Mrs. Brook meanwhile had given Mr. Longdon her hand. "Well, in any case the child *shall* soon come to you. And'oh alone," she insisted: "you need n't make phrases — I know too well what I'm about."

"One hopes really you do," pursued the unquenched Mr. Cashmore. "If that's what one gets by having known your mother —!"

"It would n't have helped *you*," Mrs. Brook retorted. "And won't you have to say it's *all* you were to get?" she pityingly murmured to her other visitor.

He turned to Vanderbank with a strange gasp, and that comforter said "Come!"

BOOK FIFTH

THE DUCHESS

THE DUCHESS

She kept it — continued to finger it. “And by whom was it given you?”

At this he turned to her smiling. “You think I’ve forgotten that too?”

“Certainly you must have forgotten, to be willing to give it away again.”

“But how do you know it was a present?”

“Such things always are — people don’t buy them for themselves.”

She had now relinquished the object, laying it upon the bench, and Vanderbank took it up. “Its origin’s lost in the night of time — it has no history except that I’ve used it. But I assure you that I do want to give you something. I’ve never given you anything.”

She was silent a little. “The exhibition you’re making,” she seriously sighed at last, “of your inconstancy and superficiality! All the relics of you that I’ve treasured and that I supposed at the time to have meant something!”

“The ‘relics’? Have you a lock of my hair?” Then as her meaning came to him: “Oh little Christmas things? Have you really kept them?”

“Laid away in a drawer of their own — done up in pink paper.”

“I know what you’re coming to,” Vanderbank said. “You’ve given *me* things, and you’re trying to convict me of having lost the sweet sense of them. But you can’t do it. Where my heart’s concerned I’m a walking reliquary. Pink paper? *I* use gold paper — and the finest of all, the gold paper of the mind.” He gave a flip with a fingernail to his cigarette and looked at its quickened fire; after which he pursued very

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"Do you know that's a great deal to say — what you said just now? I mean about your being the best friend I have."

"Of course I do, and that's exactly why I said it. You see I'm not in the least delicate or graceful or shy about it — I just come out with it and defy you to contradict me. Who, if I'm not the best, is a better one?"

"Well," Nanda replied, "I feel since I've known Mr. Longdon that I've almost the sort of friend who makes every one else not count."

"Then at the end of three months he has arrived at a value for you that I have n't reached in all these years?"

"Yes," she returned — "the value of my not being afraid of him."

Vanderbank, on the bench, shifted his position, turning more to her and throwing an arm over the back. "And you're afraid of *me*?"

"Horribly — hideously."

"Then our long, our happy relations —?"

"They're just what makes my terror," she broke in, "particularly abject. Happy relations don't matter. I always think of you with fear."

His elbow rested on the back and his hand supported his head. "How awfully curious — if it be true!"

She had been looking away to the sweet English distance, but at this she made a movement. "Oh Mr. Van, I'm 'true'!"

As Mr. Van himself could n't have expressed at any subsequent time to any interested friend the par-

THE DUCHESS

"Ah," their companion laughed, "you two are the crowd!"

"Well — have your tea first."

Vanderbank on this, giving it up with the air of amused accommodation that was never — certainly for these two — at fault in him, offered to Mr. Longdon before departing the handshake of greeting he had omitted; a demonstration really the warmer for the tone of the joke that went with it.

"Intrigant!"

THE DUCHESS

feast all spread, and with nothing to blunt our curiosity but the general knowledge that there will be people and things — with nothing but that we comfortably take our places.” He answered nothing, though her picture apparently reached him. “There *are* people, there *are* things, and all in a plenty. Had every one, when you came away, turned up?” she asked as he was still silent.

“I dare say. There were some ladies and gentlemen on the terrace whom I did n’t know. But I looked only for you and came this way on an indication of your mother’s.”

“And did she ask that if you should find me with Mr. Van you’d make him come to her?”

Mr. Longdon replied to this with some delay and without movement. “How could she have supposed he was here?”

“Since he had not yet been to the house? Oh it has always been a wonder to me, the things that mamma supposes! I see she asked you,” Nanda insisted.

At this her old friend turned to her. “But it was n’t because of that I got rid of him.”

She had a pause. “No — you don’t mind everything mamma says.”

“I don’t mind ‘everything’ anybody says: not even, my dear, when the person’s you.”

Again she waited an instant. “Not even when it’s Mr. Van?”

Mr. Longdon candidly considered. “Oh I take him up on all sorts of things.”

“That shows then the importance they have for

THE DUCHESS

"It *is*, as you said just now, exciting! But it makes me" — and he became abrupt again — "want you, as I've already told you, to come to *my* place. Not, however, that we may be still more mad together."

The girl shared from the bench his contemplation. "Do you call *this* madness?"

Well, he rather stuck to it. "You spoke of it yourself as excitement. You'll make of course one of your fine distinctions, but I take it in my rough way as a whirl. We're going round and round." In a minute he had folded his arms with the same closeness Vanderbank had used — in a minute he too was nervously shaking his foot. "Steady, steady; if we sit close we shall see it through. But come down to Suffolk for sanity."

"You do mean then that I may come alone?"

"I won't receive you, I assure you, on any other terms. I want to show you," he continued, "what life *can* give. Not of course," he subjoined, "of this sort of thing."

"No — you've told me. Of peace."

"Of peace," said Mr. Longdon. "Oh you don't know — you have n't the least idea. That's just why I want to show you."

Nanda looked as if already she saw it in the distance. "But will it be peace if I'm there? I mean for *you*," she added.

"It is n't a question of 'me.' Everybody's omelet is made of somebody's eggs. Besides, I think that when we're alone together —!"

He had dropped for so long that she wondered. "Well, when we are —?"

THE DUCHESS

"His amusement," said Nanda, "is to see us believe what he says."

Mr. Longdon thought a moment. "Really, my child, you're most acute."

"Oh I have n't watched life for nothing! Mitchy does n't care," she repeated.

Her companion seemed divided between a desire to draw and a certain fear to encourage her. "Does n't care for what?"

She considered an instant, all coherently, and it might have added to Mr. Longdon's impression of her depth. "Well, for himself. I mean for his money. For anything any one may think. For Lord Petherton, for instance, really at all. Lord Petherton thinks he has helped him — thinks, that is, that Mitchy thinks he has. But Mitchy's more amused at *him* than at anybody else. He takes every one in."

"Every one but you?"

"Oh I like him."

"My poor child, you're of a profundity!" Mr. Longdon murmured.

He spoke almost uneasily, but she was not too much alarmed to continue lucid. "And he likes me, and I know just how much — and just how little. He's the most generous man in the world. It pleases him to feel that he's indifferent and splendid — there are so many things it makes up to him for." The old man listened with attention, and his young friend, conscious of it, proceeded as on ground of which she knew every inch. "He's the son, as you know, of a great bootmaker — 'to all the Courts of Europe' — who left him a large fortune, which had been made,

III

"WOULD you," the Duchess said to him the next day, "be for five minutes awfully kind to my poor little niece?" The words were spoken in charming entreaty as he issued from the house late on the Sunday afternoon — the second evening of his stay, which the next morning was to bring to an end — and on his meeting the speaker at one of the extremities of the wide cool terrace. There was at this point a subsidiary flight of steps by which she had just mounted from the grounds, one of her purposes being apparently to testify afresh to the anxious supervision of little Aggie she had momentarily suffered herself to be diverted from. This young lady, established in the pleasant shade on a sofa of light construction designed for the open air, offered the image of a patience of which it was a questionable kindness to break the spell. It was that beautiful hour when, toward the close of the happiest days of summer, such places as the great terrace at Mertle present to the fancy a recall of the banquet-hall deserted — deserted by the company lately gathered at tea and now dispersed, according to affinities and combinations promptly felt and perhaps quite as promptly criticised, either in quieter chambers where intimacy might deepen or in gardens and under trees where the stillness knew the click of balls and the good humour of games. There had been chairs, on the terrace, pushed about;

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been astute enough, had this miracle occurred, quite to complete his sense for her own understanding and suffer it to make no difference in the tone in which she still confronted him. "Oh I take the bull by the horns — I know you have n't wanted to know me. If you had you'd have called on me — I've given you plenty of hints and little coughs. Now, you see, I don't cough any more — I just rush at you and grab you. You don't call on me — so I call on *you*. There is n't any indecency moreover that I won't commit for my child."

Mr. Longdon's impenetrability crashed like glass at the elbow-touch of this large handsome practised woman, who walked for him, like some brazen pagan goddess, in a cloud of queer legend. He looked off at her child, who, at a distance and not hearing them, had not moved. "I know she's a great friend of Nanda's."

"Has Nanda told you that?"

"Often — taking such an interest in her."

"I'm glad she thinks so then — though really her interests are so various. But come to my baby. I don't make *her* come," she explained as she swept him along, "because I want you just to sit down by her there and keep the place, as one may say —!"

"Well, for whom?" he demanded as she stopped.

It was her step that had checked itself as well as her tongue, and again, suddenly, they stood quite consciously and vividly opposed. "Can I trust you?" the Duchess brought out. Again then she took herself up. "But as if I were n't already doing it! It's because I do trust you so utterly that I have n't been able

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Aggie's slate the figures were yet to be written; which sufficiently accounted for the difference of the two surfaces. Both the girls struck him as lambs with the great shambles of life in their future; but while one, with its neck in a pink ribbon, had no consciousness but that of being fed from the hand with the small sweet biscuit of unobjectionable knowledge, the other struggled with instincts and forebodings, with the suspicion of its doom and the far-borne scent, in the flowery fields, of blood.

"Oh Nanda, she's my best friend after three or four others."

"After so many?" Mr. Longdon laughed. "Don't you think that's rather a back seat, as they say, for one's best?"

"A back seat?" — she wondered with a purity!

"If you don't understand," said her companion, "it serves me right, as your aunt did n't leave me with you to teach you the slang of the day."

"The 'slang'?" — she again spotlessly speculated.

"You've never even heard the expression? I should think that a great compliment to our time if it were n't that I fear it may have been only the name that has been kept from you."

The light of ignorance in the child's smile was positively golden. "The name?" she again echoed.

She understood too little — he gave it up. "And who are all the other best friends whom poor Nanda comes after?"

"Well, there's my aunt, and Miss Merriman, and Gelsomina, and Dr. Beltram."

"And who, please, is Miss Merriman?"

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mayed," the elder man said, "to find Mr. Mitchett at the bottom."

"Oh but it's an awfully short list, is n't it? If it consists only of me and Mitchy he's not so very low down. We don't allow her very *many* friends; we look out too well for ourselves." He addressed the child as on an easy jocose understanding. "Is the question, Aggie, whether we shall allow you Mr. Longdon? Won't that rather 'do' for us — for Mitchy and me? I say, Duchess," he went on as this lady reappeared, "*are* we going to allow her Mr. Longdon and do we quite realise what we're about? We mount guard awfully, you know" — he carried the joke back to the person he had named. "We sift and we sort, we pick the candidates over, and I should like to hear any one say that in this case at least I don't keep a watch on my taste. Oh we close in!"

The Duchess, the object of her quest in her hand, had come back. "Well then Mr. Longdon will close *with* us — you'll consider henceforth that he's as safe as yourself. Here's the letter I wanted you to read — with which you'll please take a turn, in strict charge of the child, and then restore her to us. If you don't come I shall know you've found Mitchy and shall be at peace. Go, little heart," she continued to the child, "but leave me your book to look over again. I don't know that I'm quite sure!" She sent them off together, but had a grave protest as her friend put out his hand for the volume. "No, Petherton — not for books; for her reading I can't say I do trust you. But for everything else — quite!" she declared to Mr.

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Longdon with a look of conscientious courage as their companion withdrew. "I do believe," she pursued in the same spirit, "in a certain amount of intelligent confidence. Really nice men are steadied by the sense of your having had it. But I would n't," she added gaily, "trust him all round!"

V

LATE that night, in the smoking-room, when the smokers — talkers and listeners alike — were about to disperse, Mr. Longdon asked Vanderbank to stay, and then it was that the young man, to whom all the evening he had not addressed a word, could make out why, a little unnaturally, he had prolonged his vigil. “I’ve something particular to say to you and I’ve been waiting. I hope you don’t mind. It’s rather important.” Vanderbank expressed on the spot the liveliest desire to oblige him and, quickly lighting another cigarette, mounted again to the deep divan with which a part of the place was furnished. The smoking-room at Mertle was not unworthy of the general nobleness, and the fastidious spectator had clearly been reckoned on in the great leather-covered lounge that, raised by a step or two above the floor, applied its back to two quarters of the wall and enjoyed most immediately a view of the billiard-table. Mr. Longdon continued for a minute to roam with the air of dissimulated absence that, during the previous hour and among the other men, his companion’s eye had not lost; he pushed a ball or two about, examined the form of an ash-stand, swung his glasses almost with violence and declined either to smoke or to sit down. Vanderbank, perched aloft on the bench and awaiting developments, had a little the look of some prepossessing criminal who, in court, should have changed

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with a benevolent want of mercy, yet with a look in his face that spoke of what depended for him — though indeed very far within — on the upshot of his patience. The hush between them, for that matter, became a conscious public measure of the young man's honesty. He evidently at last felt it as such, and there would have been for an observer of his handsome controlled face a study of some sharp things. "I judge that you ask me for such an utterance," he finally said, "as very few persons at any time have the right to expect of a man. Think of the people — and very decent ones — to whom on so many a question one must only reply that it's none of their business."

"I see you know what I mean," said Mr. Longdon.

"Then you know also the distinguished exception I make of you. There is n't another man with whom I'd talk of it."

"And even to me you don't! But I'm none the less obliged to you," Mr. Longdon added.

"It is n't only the gravity," his companion went on; "it's the ridicule that inevitably attaches —!"

The manner in which Mr. Longdon indicated the empty room was in itself an interruption. "Don't I sufficiently spare you?"

"Thank you, thank you," said Vanderbank.

"Besides, it's not for nothing."

"Of course not!" the young man returned, though with a look of noting the next moment a certain awkwardness in his concurrence. "But don't spare me now."

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but after speaking looked about for a match and lighted a new cigarette. "I'm sure you understand," he broke out, "what an extreme effort it is to me to talk of such things!"

"Yes, yes. But it's just effort only? It gives you no pleasure? I mean the fact of her condition," Mr. Longdon explained.

Vanderbank had really to think a little. "However much it might give me I should probably not be a fellow to gush. I'm a self-conscious stick of a Briton."

"But even a stick of a Briton —!" Mr. Longdon faltered and hovered. "I've gushed in short to *you*."

"About Lady Julia?" the young man frankly asked. "Is gushing what you call what you've done?"

"Say then we're sticks of Britons. You're not in any degree at all in love?"

There fell between them, before Vanderbank replied, another pause, of which he took advantage to move once more round the table. Mr. Longdon meanwhile had mounted to the high bench and sat there as if the judge were now in his proper place. At last his companion spoke. "What you're coming to is of course that you've conceived a desire."

"That's it — strange as it may seem. But believe me, it has not been precipitate. I've watched you both."

"Oh I knew you were watching *her*," said Vanderbank.

"To such a tune that I've made up my mind. I want her so to marry —!" But on the odd little quaver of longing with which he brought it out the elder man fairly hung.

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vulgar interpretation of my motive. I should simply try to be as fine as yourself." He smoked, he moved about, then came up in another place. "I dare say you know that dear old Mitchy, under whose blessed roof we're plotting this midnight treason, would marry her like a shot and without a penny."

"I think I know everything — I think I've thought of everything. Mr. Mitchett," Mr. Longdon added, "is impossible."

Vanderbank appeared for an instant to wonder. "Wholly then through *her* attitude?"

"Altogether."

Again he hesitated. "You've asked her?"

"I've asked her."

Once more Vanderbank faltered. "And that's how you know?"

"About *your* chance? That's how I know."

The young man, consuming his cigarette with concentration, took again several turns. "And your idea *is* to give one time?"

Mr. Longdon had for a minute to turn his idea over. "How much time do you want?"

Vanderbank gave a headshake that was both restrictive and indulgent. "I must live into it a little. Your offer has been before me only these few minutes, and it's too soon for me to commit myself to anything whatever. Except," he added gallantly, "to my gratitude."

Mr. Longdon, at this, on the divan, got up, as Vanderbank had previously done, under the spring of emotion; only, unlike Vanderbank, he still stood there, his hands in his pockets and his face, a little

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can desire I should. Only *you* see it much more simply — and yet I can't just now explain. If it *were* so simple I should say to you in a moment 'Do speak to them for me' — I should leave the matter with delight in your hands. But I require time, let me remind you, and you have n't yet told me how much I may take."

This appeal had brought them again face to face, and Mr. Longdon's first reply to it was a look at his watch. "It's one o'clock."

"Oh I require" — Vanderbank had recovered his pleasant humour — "more than to-night!"

Mr. Longdon went off to the smaller table that still offered to view two bedroom candles. "You must take of course the time you need. I won't trouble you — I won't hurry you. I'm going to bed."

Vanderbank, overtaking him, lighted his candle for him; after which, handing it and smiling: "Shall we have conduced to your rest?"

Mr. Longdon looked at the other candle. "You're not coming to bed?"

"To *my* rest we shall not have conduced. I stay up a while longer."

"Good." Mr. Longdon was pleased. "You won't forget then, as we promised, to put out the lights?"

"If you trust me for the greater you can trust me for the less. Good-night."

Vanderbank had offered his hand. "Good-night." But Mr. Longdon kept him a moment. "You *don't* care for my figure?"

"Not yet — not yet. *Please.*" Vanderbank seemed really to fear it, but on Mr. Longdon's releasing him

BOOK SIXTH

MRS. BROOK

I

PRESENTING himself in Buckingham Crescent three days after the Sunday spent at Mertle, Vanderbank found Lady Fanny Cashmore in the act of taking leave of Mrs. Brook and found Mrs. Brook herself in the state of muffled exaltation that was the mark of all her intercourse — and most of all perhaps of her farewells — with Lady Fanny. This splendid creature gave out, as it were, so little that Vanderbank was freshly struck with all Mrs. Brook could take in, though nothing, for that matter, in Buckingham Crescent, had been more fully formulated on behalf of the famous beauty than the imperturbable grandeur of her almost total absence of articulation. Every aspect of the phenomenon had been freely discussed there and endless ingenuity lavished on the question of how exactly it was that so much of what the world would in another case have called complete stupidity could be kept by a mere wonderful face from boring one to death. It was Mrs. Brook who, in this relation as in many others, had arrived at the supreme expression of the law, had thrown off, happily enough, to whomever it might have concerned: "My dear thing, it all comes back, as everything always does, simply to personal pluck. It's only a question, no matter when or where, of having enough. Lady Fanny has the courage of all her silence — so much therefore that it sees her completely through and is what really

II

THE subject of this eulogy had meanwhile returned to her sofa, where she received the homage of her new visitor. "It's not I who am magnificent a bit — it's dear Mr. Longdon. I've just had from Van the most wonderful piece of news about him — his announcement of his wish to make it worth somebody's while to marry my child."

"“Make it’?” — Mitchy stared. “But *is* n’t it?”

"My dear friend, you must ask Van. Of course you've always thought so. But I must tell you all the same," Mrs. Brook went on, "that I'm delighted."

Mitchy had seated himself, but Vanderbank remained erect and became perhaps even slightly stiff. He was not angry — no member of the inner circle at Buckingham Crescent was ever angry — but he looked grave and rather troubled. "Even if it *is* decidedly fine" — he addressed his hostess straight — "I can't make out quite why you're doing *this*. I mean immediately making it known."

"Ah but what do we keep from Mitchy?" Mrs. Brook asked.

"What *can* you keep? It comes to the same thing," Mitchy said. "Besides, here we are together, share and share alike — one beautiful intelligence. Mr. Longdon's 'somebody' is of course Van. Don't try to treat me as an outsider."

Vanderbank looked a little foolishly, though it was

THE AWKWARD AGE

her own; on which, as he made no rejoinder, she held him before her. "Do you mean you *really* don't know if she gets it?"

"The money, if he *does* n't go in?" — Mitchy broke almost with an air of responsibility into Vanderbank's silence. "Ah but, as we said, surely —!"

It was Mitchy's eyes that Vanderbank met. "Yes, I should suppose she gets it."

"Perhaps then, as a compensation, she'll even get *more* —!"

"If I don't go in? Oh!" said Vanderbank. And he changed colour.

He was by this time off, but Mrs. Brook kept Mitchy a moment. "Now — by that suggestion — he has something to show. He won't go in."

MRS. BROOK

ready to do that if one only knew a little more exactly what they're to consist of."

"Oh the great advantage, I feel, is doing something for *him*."

Nanda's companion, at this, hesitated afresh. "But does n't that, my dear, put the extravagance of your surrender to him on rather an odd footing? Charity, love, begins at home, and if it's a question of merely *giving* you've objects enough for your bounty without going so far."

The girl, as her stare showed, was held a moment by her surprise, which presently broke out. "Why, I thought you wanted me so to be nice to him!"

"Well, I hope you won't think me very vulgar," said Mrs. Brook, "if I tell you that I want you still more to have some idea of what you'll get by it. I've no wish," she added, "to keep on boring you with Mitchy —"

"Don't, don't!" Nanda pleaded.

Her mother stopped as short as if there had been something in her tone to set the limit the more utterly for being unstudied. Yet poor Mrs. Brook could n't leave it there. "Then what do you get instead?"

"Instead of Mitchy? Oh," said Nanda, "I shall never marry."

Mrs. Brook at this turned away, moving over to the window with quickened weariness. Nanda, on her side, as if their talk had ended, went across to the sofa to take up her parasol before leaving the room, an impulse rather favoured than arrested by the arrival of her brother Harold, who came in at the moment both his relatives had turned a back to the door and

BOOK SEVENTH

MITCHY

I

MR. LONGDON's garden took in three acres and, full of charming features, had for its greatest wonder the extent and colour of its old brick wall, in which the pink and purple surface was the fruit of the mild ages and the protective function, for a visitor strolling, sitting, talking, reading, that of a nurse of reverie. The air of the place, in the August time, thrilled all the while with the bliss of birds, the hum of little lives unseen and the flicker of white butterflies. It was on the large flat enclosed lawn that Nanda spoke to Vanderbank of the three weeks she would have completed there on the morrow — weeks that had been — she made no secret of it — the happiest she had yet spent anywhere. The greyish day was soft and still and the sky faintly marbled, while the more newly arrived of the visitors from London, who had come late on the Friday afternoon, lounged away the morning in an attitude every relaxed line of which referred to the holiday he had, as it were — at first merely looking about and victualling — sat down in front of as a captain before a city. There were sitting-places, just there, out of the full light, cushioned benches in the thick wide spread of old mulberry-boughs. A large book of facts lay in the young man's lap, and Nanda had come out to him, half an hour before luncheon, somewhat as Beatrice came out to Benedick: not to call him immediately

MITCHY

Aggie," the girl pursued. "I mean for the real old thing."

"Yes, no doubt — if she *be* the real old thing. But what the deuce really *is* Aggie?"

"Well," said Nanda with the frankest interest, "she's a miracle. If one could be her exactly, absolutely, without the least little mite of change, one would probably be wise to close with it. Otherwise — except for anything *but* that — I'd rather brazen it out as myself."

There fell between them on this a silence of some minutes, after which it would probably not have been possible for either to say if their eyes had met while it lasted. This was at any rate not the case as Vanderbank at last remarked: "Your brass, my dear young lady, is pure gold!"

"Then it's of me, I think, that Harold ought to borrow."

"You mean therefore that mine is n't?" Vanderbank went on.

"Well, you really have n't any natural 'cheek' — not like *some* of them. You're in yourself as uneasy, if anything's said and every one giggles or makes some face, as Mr. Longdon, and if Lord Petherton had n't once told me that a man hates almost as much to be called modest as a woman does, I'd say that very often in London now you must pass some bad moments."

The present might precisely have been one of them, we should doubtless have gathered, had we seen fully recorded in Vanderbank's face the degree to which this prompt response embarrassed or at least stupefied

MITCHY

She had looked about responsibly — not to leave in disorder the garden-nook they had occupied; picking up a newspaper and changing the place of a cushion. “I do think that with him you’re remarkable,” Vanderbank observed — “putting on one side all you seem to know and on the other all he holds his tongue about. What then *does* he say?” the young man asked after a slight pause and perhaps even with a slight irritation.

Nanda glanced round again — she was folding, rather carefully, her paper. Presently her glance met their friend, who, having come out of one of the long windows that opened to the lawn, had stopped there to watch them. “He says just now that luncheon’s ready.”

MITCHY

"Oh yes" — Mitchy seemed to muse. "I shall care for *them*. Yet I don't quite see, you know, what you *owe* to Aggie. It is n't as if —!" But with this he faltered.

"As if she cared particularly for *me*? Ah that has nothing to do with it; that's a thing without which surely it's but too possible to be exquisite. There are beautiful, quite beautiful people who don't care for me. The thing that's important to one is the thing one sees one's self, and it's quite enough if *I* see what can be made of that child. Marry her, Mitchy, and you'll see who she'll care for!"

Mitchy kept his position; he was for the moment — his image of shortly before reversed — the one who appeared to sit happily and watch. "It's too awfully pleasant your asking of me anything whatever!"

"Well then, as I say, beautifully, grandly save her."

"As you say, yes" — he sympathetically inclined his head. "But without making me feel exactly what you mean by it."

"Keep her," Nanda returned, "from becoming like the Duchess."

"But she is n't a bit like the Duchess in any of her elements. She's a totally different thing."

It was only for an instant, however, that this objection seemed to tell. "That's exactly why she'll be so perfect for you. You'll get her away — take her out of her aunt's life."

Mitchy met it all now in a sort of spellbound stillness. "What do you know about her aunt's life?"

"Oh I know everything!" She spoke with her first faint shade of impatience.

MITCHY

stopped watching her; changing his posture and with his elbows on his knees he dropped for a while his face into his hands. Then he jerked himself to his feet. "There's something I wish awfully I could say to you. But I can't."

Nanda, after a slow headshake, covered him with one of the dimmest of her smiles. "You need n't say it. I know perfectly which it is." She held him an instant, after which she went on: "It's simply that you wish me fully to understand that *you*'re one who, in perfect sincerity, does n't mind one straw how awful — !"

"Yes, how awful?" He had kindled, as he paused, with his new eagerness.

"Well, one's knowledge may be. It does n't shock in you a single hereditary prejudice."

"Oh 'hereditary' — !" Mitchy ecstatically murmured.

"You even rather like me the better for it; so that one of the reasons why you could n't have told me — though not of course, I know, the only one — is that you would have been literally almost ashamed. Because, you know," she went on, "*it is strange.*"

"My lack of hereditary — ?"

"Yes, discomfort in presence of the fact I speak of. There's a kind of sense you don't possess."

His appreciation again fairly goggled at her. "Oh you do know everything!"

"You're so good that nothing shocks you," she lucidly persisted. "There's a kind of delicacy you have n't got."

He was more and more struck. "I've only that —

MITCHY

to take her out of the Duchess's life; but where am I myself, if we come to that, but even more *in* the Duchess's life than Aggie is? I'm in it by my contacts, my associations, my indifferences — all my acceptances, knowledges, amusements. I'm in it by my cynicisms — those that circumstances somehow from the first, when I began for myself to look at life and the world, committed me to and steeped me in; I'm in it by a kind of desperation that I should n't have felt perhaps if you had got hold of me sooner with just this touch with which you've got hold of me to-day; and I'm in it more than all — you'll yourself admit — by the very fact that her aunt desires, as you know, much more even than you do, to bring the thing about. Then we *should* be — the Duchess and I — shoulder to shoulder!"

Nanda heard him motionless to the end, taking also another minute to turn over what he had said. "What is it you like so in Lord Petherton?" she asked as she came to him.

"My dear child, if you only could tell me! It would be, would n't it? — it must have been — the subject of some fairy-tale, if fairy-tales were made now, or better still of some Christmas pantomime: 'The Gnome and the Giant.'"

Nanda appeared to try — not with much success — to see it. "Do you find Lord Petherton a Gnome?"

Mitchy at first, for all reward, only glared at her. "Charming, Nanda — charming!"

"A man's giant enough for Lord Petherton," she went on, "when his fortune's gigantic. He preys upon you."

MITCHY

She put out to him on this the hand he had taken a few minutes before, and he clasped it now only with the firmness it seemed to give and to ask for. "Oh it will do for that!" she said as they went out together.

MITCHY

"Completely," Mitchy smiled.

"Because" — Vanderbank with the aid of his cigar thoughtfully pieced it out — "that may possibly bring me to the point."

"Possibly!" Mitchy laughed.

He had stood a moment longer, almost as if to see the possibility develop before his eyes, and had even started at the next sound of his friend's voice. What Vanderbank in fact brought out, however, only made him turn his back. "Do you like so very much little Aggie?"

"Well," said Mitchy, "Nanda does. And I like Nanda."

"You're too amazing," Vanderbank mused. His musing had presently the effect of making him rise; meditation indeed beset him after he was on his feet. "I can't help its coming over me then that on such an extraordinary system you must also rather like *me*."

"What will you have, my dear Van?" Mitchy frankly asked. "It's the sort of thing you must be most used to. For at the present moment — look! — are n't we all at you at once?"

It was as if his dear Van had managed to appear to wonder. "'All'?"

"Nanda, Mrs. Brook, Mr. Longdon —!"

"And you. I see."

"Names of distinction. And all the others," Mitchy pursued, "that I don't count."

"Oh you're the best."

"I?"

"You're the best," Vanderbank simply repeated.

THE AWKWARD AGE

"It is all seems most extraordinary," he declared
"that you are the whole better than I do
it is impossible."

"It is all we very much the same — simple
things. That is it that inner essence of it which
appears to the consciousness —!"

"The consciousness?" — his companion took up
the word.

"Yes, enlarged and improved."

The words had made in Mitchy's lips an image by
which he found himself for a moment held. "One
must not know quite what to say or to do."

"You must say it all quietly. You're of a spe-
cial kind, one of those who, as we said the other day
about the 'reminders' — are a source of the sacred
things. To be made in such a way must take the con-
sequences just as people must take them." Mitchy
was not to be made as I am. So cheer up!"

During the morning the movement had moved to the
point of view of the world in which he presently
found himself. He might have been in emulation of his
friend, but he was not. He was not. He was not. He was not.
The meditation he next
found himself in. He had a certain resistance
to it. He was not. He was not. He was not. He was not.
He was not. He was not. He was not. He was not.

"It is all a matter of mine of course," Mitchy
said. "It is all a matter of mine of course." "but is n't her enjoyment
of it? It is all a matter of mine of course." "but is n't her enjoyment
of it? It is all a matter of mine of course." "but is n't her enjoyment
of it? It is all a matter of mine of course."

"It is all a matter of mine of course." "but is n't her enjoyment
of it? It is all a matter of mine of course." "but is n't her enjoyment
of it? It is all a matter of mine of course."

MITCHY

“Oh I don’t mind it!” Mitchy declared.

Vanderbank visibly demurred. “Ah but your choice — !”

“Is such a different sort of thing?” Mitchy, for the half-hour, in the ambiguous dusk, had never looked more droll. “The young lady I named is n’t my *choice*.”

“Well then, that’s only a sign the more that you do these things more easily.”

“Oh ‘easily’!” Mitchy murmured.

“We ought n’t at any rate to keep it up,” said Vanderbank, who had looked at his watch. “Twelve twenty-five — good-night. Shall I blow out the candles?”

“Do, please. I’ll close the window” — and Mitchy went to it. “I’ll follow you — good-night.” The candles after a minute were out and his friend had gone, but Mitchy, left in darkness face to face with the vague quiet garden, still stood there.

BOOK EIGHTH
TISHY GRENDON

TISHY GRENDON

mistake, to have in this way a quiet moment with you. You came on ahead of your mother?"

"Oh no — I'm staying here."

"Oh!" said Vanderbank.

"Mr. Longdon came up with me — I came here, Friday last, straight."

"You parted at the door?" he asked with marked gaiety.

She thought a moment — she was more serious. "Yes — but only for a day or two. He's coming to-night."

"Good. How delightful!"

"He'll be glad to see you," Nanda said, looking at the flowers.

"Awfully kind of him when I've been such a brute."

"How — a brute?"

"Well, I mean not writing — nor going back."

"Oh I see," Nanda simply returned.

It was a simplicity that, clearly enough, made her friend a little awkward. "Has he — a — minded? But he can't have complained!" he quickly added.

"Oh he never complains."

"No, no — it is n't in him. But it's just that," said Vanderbank, "that makes one feel so base. I've been ferociously busy."

"He knows that — he likes it," Nanda returned. "He delights in your work. And I've done what I can for him."

"Ah," said her companion, "you've evidently brought him round. I mean to this lady."

"To Tishy? Oh of course I can't leave her — with nobody."

TISHY GRENDON

you, bang off, four. So there you are!" Harold gaily wound up.

"I see now why he's the rage!" Vanderbank observed to Nanda.

But Mrs. Grendon expressed to their young friend a lingering wonder. "Do you mean you go in for the adoption —?"

"Oh Tishy!" Nanda mildly murmured.

Harold, however, had his own tact. "The dear man's taking her quite over? Not altogether unreservedly. I'm with the governor: I think we ought to *get* something. 'Oh yes, dear man, but what do you *give* us for her?' — that's what *I* should say to him. I mean, don't you know, that I don't think she's making quite the bargain she might. If he were to want *me* I don't say he might n't have me, but I should have it on my conscience to make it in one way or another a good thing for my parents. You *are* nice, old woman" — he turned to his sister — "and one can still feel for the flower of your youth something of the wonderful 'reverence' that we were all brought up on. For God's sake therefore — all the more — don't really close with him till you've had another word or two with me. I'll be hanged" — he appealed to the company again — "if he shall have her for nothing!"

"See rather," Vanderbank said to Mrs. Grendon, "how little it's like your really losing her that she should be able this evening fairly to bring the dear man to you. At this rate we don't lose her — we simply get him as well."

"Ah but is it quite the dear man's *company* we

TISHY GRENDON

"Well, *I* have — that's just where it is," said Harold. "Thank you all the more, old Van, for the tip."

There was an announcement just now at the door, and Tishy turned to meet the Duchess, with Harold, almost as if he had been master of the house, figuring but a step behind her. "Don't mind *her*," Vanderbank immediately said to the companion with whom he was left, "but tell me, while I still have hold of you, who wrote my name on the French novel that I noticed a few minutes since in the other room?"

Nanda at first only wondered. "If it's there — did n't *you*?"

He just hesitated. "If it were here you'd see if it's my hand."

Nanda faltered, and for somewhat longer. "How should I see? What do I know of your hand?"

He looked at her hard. "You *have* seen it."

"Oh — so little!" she replied with a faint smile.

"Do you mean I've not written to you for so long? Surely I did in — when was it?"

"Yes, when? But why *should* you?" she asked in quite a different tone.

He was not prepared on this with the right statement, and what he did after a moment bring out had for the occasion a little the sound of the wrong. "The beauty of *you* is that you're too good; which for me is but another way of saying you're too clever. You make no demands. You let things go. You don't allow in particular for the human weakness that enjoys an occasional glimpse of the weakness of others."

TISHY GRENDON

“Oh I see,” said Nanda. “It *is* my knowing, after all, everything.”

“Everything. The book I just mentioned is one that, months ago — I remember now — I lent your mother.”

“Oh a thing in a blue cover? I remember then too.” Nanda’s face cleared up. “I had forgotten it was lying about here, but I must have brought it — in fact I remember I did — for Tishy. And I wrote your name on it so that we might know —”

“That I had n’t lent it to either of you? It did n’t occur to you to write your own?” Vanderbank went on.

“Well, but if it is n’t mine? It *is* n’t mine, I’m sure.”

“Therefore also if it can’t be Tishy’s —”

“The thing’s simple enough — it’s mother’s.”

“‘Simple’?” Vanderbank laughed. “I like you! And may I ask if you’ve read the remarkable work?”

“Oh yes.” Then she wonderfully said: “For Tishy.”

“To see if it would do?”

“I’ve often done that,” the girl returned.

“And she takes your word?”

“Generally. I think I remember she did that time.”

“And read the confounded thing?”

“Oh no!” said Nanda.

He looked at her a moment longer. “You’re too particular!” he rather oddly sounded, turning away with it to meet Mr. Longdon.

TISHY GRENDON

"Not a line. You answer me of course, when I say *that*, you answer me with your adored Lady Julia, and will want to know what then becomes of the lucky resemblance. I quite grant you that Lady Julia must have had the thing we speak of. But that dear sweet blessed thing is very much the same lost secret as the dear sweet blessed *other* thing that went away with it — the decent leisure that, for the most part, we've also seen the last of. It's the thing at any rate that poor Nanda and all her kind have most effectually got rid of. Oh if you'd trust me a little more you'd see that I'm quite at one with you on all the changes for the worse. I bear up, but I'm old enough to have known. All the same Mrs. Brook has something — say what you like — when she bends that little brown head. *Dieu sait comme elle se coiffe*, but what she gets out of it! Only look."

Mr. Longdon conveyed in an indescribable manner that he had retired to a great distance; yet even from this position he must have launched a glance that arrived at a middle way. "They both know you're watching them."

"And don't they know *you* are? Poor Mr. Van has a consciousness!"

"So should I if two terrible women —"

"Were admiring you both at once?" The Duchess folded the big feathered fan that had partly protected their vision. "Well, *she*, poor dear, can't help it. She wants him herself."

At the drop of the Duchess's fan he restored his nippers. "And he does n't — not a bit — want *her*!"

"There it is. She has put down her money, as it

III

HE mechanically obeyed her, though it happened to lend him the air of taking Mrs. Brook's approach for a signal to resume his seat. She came over to them, Vanderbank followed, and it was without again moving, with a vague upward gaze in fact from his place, that Mr. Longdon received as she stood before him a challenge of a sort to flash a point into what the Duchess had just said. "Why do you hate me so?"

Vanderbank, who, beside Mrs. Brook, looked at him with attention, might have suspected him of turning a trifle pale; though even Vanderbank, with reasons of his own for an observation of the sharpest, could scarce have read into the matter the particular dim vision that would have accounted for it — the flicker of fear of what Mrs. Brook, whether as daughter or as mother, was at last so strangely and differently to show herself.

"I should warn you, sir," the young man threw off, "how little we consider that — in Buckingham Crescent certainly — a fair question. It is n't playing the game — it's hitting below the belt. We hate and we love — the latter especially; but to tell each other why is to break that little tacit rule of finding out for ourselves which is the delight of our lives and the source of our triumphs. You can say, you know, if you like, but you're not obliged."

TISHY GRENDON

moreover who gives out that her husband does n't like her. *He*, poor man, does n't say anything of the sort."

"Yes, but, after all, you know" — Vanderbank just put it to her — "where the deuce, all the while, *is* he?"

"Heaven forbid," the Duchess remarked, "that we should too rashly ascertain."

"There it is — exactly," Mr. Longdon subjoined.

He had once more his success of hilarity, though not indeed to the injury of the Duchess's next word. "It's Nanda, you know, who speaks, and loud enough, for Harry Grendon's dislikes."

"That's easy for her," Mrs. Brook declared, "when she herself is n't one of them."

"She is n't surely one of anybody's," Mr. Longdon gravely observed.

Mrs. Brook gazed across at him. "You *are* too dear! But I've none the less a crow to pick with you."

Mr. Longdon returned her look, but returned it somehow to Van. "You frighten me, you know, out of my wits."

"*I* do?" said Vanderbank.

Mr. Longdon just hesitated. "Yes."

"It must be the sacred terror," Mrs. Brook suggested to Van, "that Mitchy so often speaks of. *I*'m not trying with you," she went on to Mr. Longdon, "for anything of that kind, but only for the short half-hour in private that I think you won't for the world grant me. Nothing will induce you to find yourself alone with me."

"Why what on earth," Vanderbank asked, "do you suspect him of supposing you want to do?"

TISHY GRENDON

took a slight but immediate stretch. "Is Harold with Lady Fanny?"

"You ask it, my dear child," said the Duchess, "as if it were too grand to be believed. It's the note of eagerness," she went on for Mr. Longdon's benefit — "it's almost the note of hope: one of those that *ces messieurs*, that we all in fact delight in and find so matchless. She desires for Harold the highest advantages."

"Well then," declared Vanderbank, who had achieved a glimpse, "he's clearly having them. It brings home to one his success."

"His success is true," Mrs. Brook insisted. "How he does it I don't know."

"Oh *don't* you?" trumpeted the Duchess.

"He's amazing," Mrs. Brook pursued. "I watch — I hold my breath. But I'm bound to say also I rather admire. He somehow amuses them."

"She's as pleased as Punch," said the Duchess.

"Those great calm women — they like slighter creatures."

"The great calm whales," the Duchess laughed, "swallow the little fishes."

"Oh my dear," Mrs. Brook returned, "Harold can be tasted, if you like —"

"If *I* like?" the Duchess parenthetically jeered. "Thank you, love!"

"But he can't, I think, be eaten. It all works out," Mrs. Brook expounded, "to the highest end. If Lady Fanny's amused she'll be quiet."

"Bless me," cried the Duchess, "of all the immoral speeches —! I put it to you, Longdon. Does

TISHY GRENDON

"Frankly, my dear," the Duchess answered, "I don't think that you personally are either."

"Oh as for that — which is what matters least — we shall perhaps see." With which Mrs. Brook turned again to Mr. Longdon. "I have n't explained to you what I meant just now. We want Nanda."

Mr. Longdon stared. "At home again?"

"In her little old nook. You must give her back."

"Do you mean altogether?"

"Ah that will be for you in a manner to arrange. But you've had her practically these five months, and with no desire to be unreasonable we yet have our natural feelings."

This interchange, to which circumstances somehow gave a high effect of suddenness and strangeness, was listened to by the others in a quick silence that was like the sense of a blast of cold air, though with the difference between the spectators that Vanderbank attached his eyes hard to Mrs. Brook and that the Duchess looked as straight at Mr. Longdon, to whom clearly she wished to convey that if he had wondered a short time before how Mrs. Brook would do it he must now be quite at his ease. He indulged in fact, after this lady's last words, in a pause that might have signified some of the fulness of a new light. He only said very quietly: "I thought you liked it."

At this his neighbour broke in. "The care you take of the child? They *do*!" The Duchess, as she spoke, became aware of the nearer presence of Edward Brookenham, who within a minute had come in from the other room; and her decision of character leaped forth in her quick signal to him. "Edward will tell

THE AWKWARD AGE

you." He was already before their semicircle. "Do you, dear," she appealed, "want Nanda back from Mr. Longdon?"

Edward plainly could be trusted to feel in his quiet way that the oracle must be a match for the priestess. "Want' her, Jane? We would n't *take* her." And as if knowing quite what he was about he looked at his wife only after he had spoken.

IV

HIS reply had complete success, to which there could scarce have afterwards been a positive denial that some sound of amusement even from Mr. Longdon himself had in its degree contributed. Certain it was that Mrs. Brook found, as she exclaimed that her husband was always so awfully civil, just the right note of resigned understanding; whereupon he for a minute presented to them blankly enough his fine dead face. “‘Civil’ is just what I was afraid I was n’t. I mean, you know,” he continued to Mr. Longdon, “that you really must n’t look to us to let you off—!”

“From a week or a day” — Mr. Longdon took him up — “of the time to which you consider I’ve pledged myself? My dear sir, please don’t imagine it’s for *me* the Duchess appeals.”

“It’s from your wife, you delicious dull man,” that lady elucidated. “If you wished to be stiff with our friend here you’ve really been so with *her*; which comes, no doubt, from the absence between you of proper preconcerted action. You spoke without your cue.”

“Oh!” said Edward Brookenham.

“That’s it, Jane” — Mrs. Brook continued to take it beautifully. “We dressed to-day in a hurry and had n’t time for our usual rehearsal. Edward, when we dine out, generally brings three pocket-

TISHY GRENDON

bled on, "it only strikes you still more — and to a degree that blinds you to its other possible bearings — as the last proof that I'm too tortuous for you to know what I'd be at!"

Mr. Longdon faced her, across his interval, with his original terror represented now only by such a lingering flush as might have formed a natural tribute to a brilliant scene. "I have n't the glimmering of an idea of what you'd be at. But please understand," he added, "that I don't at all refuse you the private half-hour you referred to a while since."

"Are you really willing to put the child up for the rest of the year?" Edward placidly demanded, speaking as if quite unaware that anything else had taken place.

His wife fixed her eyes on him. "The ingenuity of your companions, love, plays in the air like the lightning, but flashes round your head only, by good fortune, to leave it unscathed. Still, you have after all your own strange wit, and I'm not sure that any of ours ever compares with it. Only, confronted also with ours, how can poor Mr. Longdon really choose which of the two he'll meet?"

Poor Mr. Longdon now looked hard at Edward. "Oh Mr. Brookenham's, I feel, any day. It's even with *you*, I confess," he said to him, "that I'd rather have that private half-hour."

"Done!" Mrs. Brook declared. "I'll send him to you. But we *have*, you know, as Van says, gone to pieces," she went on, twisting her pretty head and tossing it back over her shoulder to an auditor of whose approach to her from behind, though it was

TISHY GRENDON

"Hide and seek? Why, is n't it innocent, Mitch!" Mrs. Brook exclaimed.

Mitchy, speaking for the first time, faced her with extravagant gloom. "Do you really think so?"

"That's *her* innocence!" the Duchess laughed to him.

"And don't you suppose he has found it *yet*?" Mrs. Brook pursued earnestly to Tishy. "Is n't it something we might *all* play at if —?" On which however, abruptly checking herself, she changed her note. "Nanda love, please go and invite them to join us."

Mitchy, at this, on his ottoman, wheeled straight round to the girl, who looked at him before speaking. "I'll go if Mitchy tells me."

"But if he does fear," said her mother, "that there may be something in it —?"

Mitchy jerked back to Mrs. Brook. "Well, you see, I don't want to give way to my fear. Suppose there *should* be something! Let me not know."

She dealt with him tenderly. "I see. You could n't — so soon — bear it."

"Ah but, *savez-vous*," the Duchess interposed with some majesty, "you're horrid!"

"Let them alone," Mitchy continued. "We don't want at all events a general romp."

"Oh I thought just that," said Mrs. Brook, "was what the Duchess wished the door locked for! Perhaps moreover" — she returned to Tishy — "he has n't yet found the book."

"He can't," Tishy said with simplicity.

"But why in the world —?"

TISHY GRENDON

Mr. Van's name." The girl's eyes were on Mr. Longdon, but her words as for the company. "I brought the book here from Buckingham Crescent and left it by accident in the other room."

"By accident, my dear," her mother replied, "I do quite hope. But what on earth did you bring it for? It's too hideous."

Nanda seemed to wonder. "Is it?" she murmured.

"Then you have n't read it?"

She just hesitated. "One hardly knows now, I think, what is and what is n't."

"She brought it only for *me* to read," Tishy gravely interposed.

Mrs. Brook looked strange. "Nanda *recommended* it?"

"Oh no — the contrary." Tishy, as if scared by so much publicity, floundered a little. "She only told me —"

"The awful subject?" Mrs. Brook wailed.

There was so deepening an echo of the drollery of this last passage that it was a minute before Vanderbank could be heard saying: "The responsibility's wholly mine for setting the beastly thing in motion. Still," he added good-humouredly and as to minimise if not the cause at least the consequence, "I think I agree with Nanda that it's no worse than anything else."

Mrs. Brook had recovered the volume from Mr. Longdon's relaxed hand and now, without another glance at it, held it behind her with an unusual air of firmness. "Oh how can you say that, my dear man, of anything so revolting?"

THE AWKWARD AGE

The discussion kept them for the instant well face to face. "Then did you read it?"

She debated, jerking the book into the nearest empty chair, where Mr. Cashmore quickly pounced on it. "Was n't it for that you brought it me?" she demanded. Yet before he could answer she again challenged her child. "Have you read this work, Nanda?"

"Yes mamma."

"Oh I say!" cried Mr. Cashmore, hilarious and turning the leaves.

Mr. Longdon had by this time ceremoniously approached Tishy. "Good-night."

BOOK NINTH
VAN DER BANK

I

"I THINK then you had better wait," Mrs. Brook said, "till I see if he has gone;" and on the arrival the next moment of the servants with the tea she was able to put her question. "Is Mr. Cashmore still with Miss Brookenham?"

"No, ma'am," the footman replied. "I let Mr. Cashmore out five minutes ago."

Vanderbank showed for the next short time by his behaviour what he felt at not yet being free to act on this; moving pointlessly about the room while the servants arranged the tea-table and taking no trouble to make, for appearance, any other talk. Mrs. Brook, on her side, took so little that the silence — which their temporary companions had all the effect of keeping up by conscious dawdling — became precisely one of those precious lights for the circle belowstairs which people fondly fancy they have not kindled when they have not spoken. But Vanderbank spoke again as soon as the door was closed. "Does he run in and out that way without even speaking to you?"

Mrs. Brook turned away from the fire that, late in May, was the only charm of the crude cold afternoon. "One would like to draw the curtains, would n't one? and gossip in the glow of the hearth."

"Oh 'gossip'!" Vanderbank wearily said as he came to her pretty table.

VANDEBANK

she had nothing against that. "As for instance when it *would* be so easy —!"

"Yes, to take up what lies there, you yet so splendidly abstain."

"You literally press upon me my opportunity? It's *you* who are splendid!" she rather strangely laughed.

"Don't you at least want to say," he went on with a slight flush, "what you *most* obviously and naturally might?"

Appealed to on the question of underlying desire, Mrs. Brook went through the decent form of appearing to try to give it the benefit of any doubt. "Don't I want, you mean, to find out before you go up what *you* want? Shall you be too disappointed," she asked, "if I say that, since I shall probably learn, as we used to be told as children, 'all in good time,' I can wait till the light comes out of itself?"

Vanderbank still lingered. "You *are* deep!"

"You've only to be deeper."

"That's easy to say. I'm afraid at any rate you won't think I am," he pursued after a pause, "if I ask you what in the world — since Harold does keep Lady Fanny so quiet — Cashmore still requires Nanda's direction for."

"Ah find out!" said Mrs. Brook.

"Is n't Mrs. Donner quite shelved?"

"Find out," she repeated.

Vanderbank had reached the door and had his hand on the latch, but there was still something else. "You scarce suppose, I imagine, that she has come to like him 'for himself'?"

THE AWKWARD AGE

“Find out!” And Mrs. Brook, who was now on her feet, turned away.

He watched her a moment more, then checked himself and left her.

VANDEBANK

had taken it in. "Then whom were you speaking of?"

"Mr. Longdon's coming to tea with her. She has had a note."

"But when did he come to town?"

"Last night, I believe. The note, an hour or two ago, announced him — brought by hand and hoping she'd be at home."

Mrs. Brook thought again. "I'm glad she is. He's too sweet. By hand! — it must have been so he sent them to mamma. He would n't for the world wire."

"Oh Nanda has often wired to *him*," her father returned.

"Then she ought to be ashamed of herself. But how," said Mrs. Brook, "do you know?"

"Oh I know when we're in a thing like this."

"Yet you complain of her want of intimacy with you! It turns out that you're as thick as thieves."

Edward looked at this charge as he looked at all old friends, without a sign — to call a sign — of recognition. "I don't know of whose want of intimacy with me I've ever complained. There is n't much more of it, that I can see, that any of them could put on. What do you suppose I'd have them do? If I on my side don't get very far I may have alluded to *that*."

"Oh but you do," Mrs. Brook declared. "You think you don't, but you get very far indeed. You're always, as I said just now, bringing out something that you've got somewhere."

"Yes, and seeing you flare up at it. What I bring out is only what they tell me."

VANDEBANK

"Do you call Mr. Longdon so very wrong? I wish," she declared with a strange sigh, "that *I* had had a Mr. Longdon!"

"I wish very much you had. I would n't have taken it like Van."

"Oh it took Van," Mrs. Brook replied, "to put *them* where they are."

"But where *are* they? That's exactly it. In these three months, for instance," Edward demanded, "how has their connexion profited?"

Mrs. Brook turned it over. "Profited which?"

"Well, one cares most for one's child."

"Then she has become for him what we've most hoped her to be — an object of compassion still more marked."

"Is that what you've hoped her to be?"

Mrs. Brook was obviously so lucid for herself that her renewed expression of impatience had plenty of point. "How can you ask after seeing what I did —"

"That night at Mrs. Grendon's? Well, it's the first time I *have* asked it."

Mrs. Brook had a silence more pregnant. "It's for being with *us* that he pities her."

Edward thought. "With me too?"

"Not so much — but still you help."

"I thought you thought I did n't — that night."

"At Tishy's? Oh you did n't matter," said Mrs. Brook. "Everything, every one helps. Harold distinctly" — she seemed to figure it all out — "and even the poor children, I dare say, a little. Oh but every one" — she warmed to the vision — "it's perfect. Jane immensely, *par exemple*. Almost all the

VANDERBANK

"Of course if it *is* sure —"

"Well?"

"Why, it is. But of course if it is n't —"

"Well?"

"Why, she won't have anything. Anything but *us*," he continued to reflect. "Unless, you know, you're working it on a certainty —!"

"That's just what I *am* working it on. I did nothing till I knew I was safe."

"'Safe'?" he ambiguously echoed while on this their eyes met longer.

"Safe. I knew he'd stick."

"But how did you know Van would n't?"

"No matter 'how' — but better still. He has n't stuck." She said it very simply, but she turned away from him.

His eyes for a little followed her. "We don't *know*, after all, the old boy's means."

"I don't know what you mean by 'we' don't. Nanda does."

"But where's the support if she does n't tell us?"

Mrs. Brook, who had faced about, again turned from him. "I hope you don't forget," she remarked with superiority, "that we don't ask her."

"*You* don't?" Edward gloomed.

"Never. But I trust her."

"Yes," he mused afresh, "one must trust one's child. Does Van?" he then enquired.

"Does he trust her?"

"Does he know anything of the general figure?"

She hesitated. "Everything. It's high."

"He has told you so?"

VANDEBANK

our troubles bring us more together. Now go up to her."

Edward kept a queer face, into which this succession of remarks introduced no light, but he finally moved, and it was only when he had almost reached the door that he stopped again. "Of course you know he has sent her no end of books."

"Mr. Longdon — of late? Oh yes, a deluge, so that her room looks like a bookseller's back shop; and all, in the loveliest bindings, the most standard English works. I not only know it, naturally, but I know — what you don't — why."

"'Why'?" Edward echoed. "Why but that — unless he should send her money — it's about the only kindness he can show her at a distance?"

Mrs. Brook hesitated; then with a little suppressed sigh: "That's it!"

But it still held him. "And perhaps he does send her money."

"No. Not now."

Edward lingered. "Then is he taking it out —?"

"In books only?" It was wonderful — with its effect on him now visible — how she possessed her subject. "Yes, that's his delicacy — for the present."

"And you're not afraid for the future —?"

"Of his considering that the books will have worked it off? No. They're thrown in."

Just perceptibly cheered he reached the door, where, however, he had another pause. "You don't think I had better see Van?"

She stared. "What for?"

"Why, to ask what the devil he means."

III

VERY different was Mrs. Brook's welcome of the restored wanderer, to whom, in a brief space, she addressed every expression of surprise and delight, though marking indeed at last, as a qualification of these things, her regret that he declined to partake of her tea or to allow her to make him what she called "snug for a talk" in his customary corner of her sofa. He pleaded frankly agitation and embarrassment, reminded her even that he was awfully shy and that after separations, complications, whatever might at any time happen, he was conscious of the dust that had settled on intercourse and that he could n't blow away in a single breath. She was only, according to her nature, to indulge him if, while he walked about and changed his place, he came to the surface but in patches and pieces. There was so much he wanted to know that — well, as they had arrived only the night before, she could judge. There was knowledge, it became clear, that Mrs. Brook almost equally craved, so that it even looked at first as if, on either side, confidence might be choked by curiosity. This disaster was finally barred by the fact that the spirit of enquiry found for Mitchy material that was comparatively plastic. That was after all apparent enough when at the end of a few vain passes he brought out sociably: "Well, has he done it?"

Still indeed there was something in Mrs. Brook's

VANDEBANK

I could have done even just now with a little more of Edward."

Mrs. Brook, in her own manner and with a slow headshake, looked lovely. "*I* could n't." Then she puzzled it out with a pause. "It even does come over me that if you don't mind —!"

"What, my dear woman," said Mitchy encouragingly, "did I *ever* mind? I assure you," he laughed, "I have n't come back to begin!"

At this, suddenly dropping everything else, she laid her hand on him. "Mitchy love, *are* you happy?"

So for a moment they stood confronted. "Not perhaps as *you* would have tried to make me."

"Well, you've still *got* me, you know."

"Oh," said Mitchy, "I've got a great deal. How, if I really look at it, can a man of my peculiar nature — it *is*, you know, awfully peculiar — *not* be happy? Think, if one is driven to it for instance, of the breadth of my sympathies."

Mrs. Brook, as a result of thinking, appeared for a little to demur. "Yes — but one must n't be too much driven to it. It's by one's sympathies that one suffers. If you should do that I could n't bear it."

She clearly evoked for Mitchy a definite image. "It *would* be funny, would n't it? But you would n't have to. I'd go off and do it alone somewhere — in a dark room, I think, or on a desert island; at any rate where nobody should see. Where's the harm moreover," he went on, "of any suffering that does n't bore one, as I'm sure, however much its outer aspect might amuse some others, mine would n't bore me? What I should do in my desert island or my dark

VANDEBANK

"When was it ever really on?"

"Oh I know your view, and that, I think," said Mitchy, "is the most extraordinary part of it. I can tell you it would have put *me* on."

"My view?" Mrs. Brook thought. "Have you forgotten that I had for you too a view that did n't?"

"Ah but we did n't differ, you and I. It was n't a defiance and a prophecy. You wanted *me*."

"I did indeed!" Mrs. Brook said simply.

"And you did n't want him. For *her*, I mean. So you risked showing it."

She looked surprised. "*Did I?*"

Again they were face to face. "Your candour's divine!"

She wondered. "Do you mean it was even then?"

Mitchy smiled at her till he was red. "It's exquisite now."

"Well," she presently returned, "I knew my Van!"

"I thought I knew 'yours' too," Mitchy said. Their eyes met a minute and he added: "But I did n't." Then he exclaimed: "How you've worked it!"

She looked barely conscious. "'Worked it'?" After which, with a slightly sharper note: "How do you know — while you've been amusing yourself in places that I'd give my head to see again but never shall — what I've been doing?"

"Well, I saw, you know, that night at Tishy's, just before we left England, your wonderful start. I got a look at your attitude, as it were, and your system."

Her eyes were now far away, and she spoke after an instant without moving them. "And did n't I by the same token get a look at yours?"

VANDEBANK

smiled, "all, to *you*." After which he continued: "Has he been with you much?"

She just hesitated. "As little as possible. But as it happens he was here just now."

Her visitor fairly flushed. "And I've only missed him?"

Her pause again was of the briefest. "You would n't if he *had* gone up."

"Gone up?"

"To Nanda, who has now her own sitting-room, as you know; for whom he immediately asked and for whose benefit, whatever you may think, I was at the end of a quarter of an hour, I assure you, perfectly ready to release him. He changed his mind, however, and went away without seeing her."

Mitchy showed the deepest interest. "And what made him change his mind?"

"Well, I'm thinking it out."

He appeared to watch this labour. "But with no light yet?"

"When it comes I'll tell you."

He hung fire once more but an instant. "You did n't yourself work the thing again?"

She rose at this in strange sincerity. "I think, you know, you go very far."

"Why, did n't we just now settle," he promptly replied, "that it's all instinctive and unconscious? If it was so that night at Tishy's —!"

"Ah, *voyons, voyons*," she broke in, "what did I do even then?"

He laughed out at something in her tone. "You'd like it again all pictured —?"

VANDEBANK

She dimly smiled. "It will be like old times."

He rather demurred. "For you perhaps. But not for me."

In spite of what he said it did hold her, and her hand again almost caressed him. "But — till you do tell me — is it very very dreadful?"

"That's just perhaps what I may have to get you to decide."

"Then shall I help you?" she eagerly asked.

"I think it will be quite in your line."

At the thought of her line — it sounded somehow so general — she released him a little with a sigh, yet still looking round, as it were, for possibilities. "Jane, you know, is in a state."

"Yes, Jane's in a state. That's a comfort!"

She continued in a manner to cling to him. "But is it your only one?"

He was very kind and patient. "Not perhaps quite."

"I'm a little of one?"

"My dear child, as you see."

Yes, she saw, but was still on the wing. "And shall you have recourse —?"

"To what?" he asked as she appeared to falter.

"I don't mean to anything violent. But shall you tell Nanda?"

Mitchy wondered. "Tell her —?"

"Well, everything. I think, you know," Mrs. Brook musingly observed, "that it would really serve her right."

Mitchy's silence, which lasted a minute, seemed to take the idea, but not perhaps quite to know what

VANDERBANK

"It's to put before him —!"

"Oh I see: the situation."

"What has happened here to-day. Van's marked retreat and how, with the time that has passed, it makes us at last know where we are. You of course for yourself," Mrs. Brook wound up, "see that."

"Where we are?" Mitchy took a turn and came back. "But what then did Van come for? If you speak of a retreat there must have been an advance."

"Oh," said Mrs. Brook, "he simply wanted not to look too brutal. After so much absence he *could* come."

"Well, if he established that he is n't brutal, where was the retreat?"

"In his not going up to Nanda. He came — frankly — to do that, but made up his mind on second thoughts that he could n't risk even being civil to her."

Mitchy had visibly warmed to his work. "Well, and what made the difference?"

She wondered. "What difference?"

"Why, of the effect, as you say, of his second thoughts. Thoughts of what?"

"Oh," said Mrs. Brook suddenly and as if it were quite simple — "I know *that*! Suspensions."

"And of whom?"

"Why, of *you*, you goose. Of your not having done —"

"Well, what?" he persisted as she paused.

"How shall I say it? The best thing for yourself. And of Nanda's feeling that. Don't you see?"

In the effort of seeing, or perhaps indeed in the full

VANDERBANK

plained." Then as his companion took this in silence, "But you don't like it?" he asked.

"It only comes to me that Mrs. Brook's explanations —!"

"Are often so odd? Oh yes; but Nanda, you know, allows for that oddity. And Mrs. Brook, by the same token," Mitchy developed, "knows herself — no one better — what may frequently be thought of it. That's precisely the reason of her desire that you should have on this occasion explanations from a source that she's so good as to pronounce, for the immediate purpose, superior. As for Nanda," he wound up, "to be aware that we're here together won't strike her as so bad a sign."

"No," Mr. Longdon attentively assented; "she'll hardly fear we're plotting her ruin. But what then has happened to her?"

"Well," said Mitchy, "it's you, I think, who will have to give it a name. I know you know what I've known."

Mr. Longdon, his nippers again in place, hesitated. "Yes, I know."

"And you've accepted it."

"How could I help it? To reckon with such cleverness —!"

"Was beyond you? Ah it was n't my cleverness," Mitchy said. "There's a greater than mine. There's a greater even than Van's. That's the whole point," he went on while his friend looked at him hard. "You don't even like it just a little?"

Mr. Longdon wondered. "The existence of such an element —?"

VANDERBANK

"Yes." Mitchy's concurrence was grave. "Only you and me."

"Only you and me."

The eyes of the two men met over it in a pause terminated at last by Mitchy's saying: "We must make it all up to her."

"Is that your idea?"

"Ah," said Mitchy gently, "don't laugh at it."

His friend's grey gloom again covered him. "But what *can* —?" Then as Mitchy showed a face that seemed to wince with a silent "What *could*?" the old man completed his objection. "Think of the magnitude of the loss."

"Oh I don't for a moment suggest," Mitchy hastened to reply, "that it is n't immense."

"She does care for him, you know," said Mr. Longdon.

Mitchy, at this, gave a wide, prolonged glare. "'Know' —?" he ever so delicately murmured.

His irony had quite touched. "But of course you know! You know everything — Nanda and you."

There was a tone in it that moved a spring, and Mitchy laughed out. "I like your putting me with her! But we're all together. With Nanda," he next added, "it *is* deep."

His companion took it from him. "Deep."

"And yet somehow it is n't abject."

The old man wondered. "'Abject'?"

"I mean it is n't pitiful. In its way," Mitchy developed, "it's happy."

This too, though rather ruefully, Mr. Longdon could take from him. "Yes — in its way."

VANDEBANK

to see her. But after spending half an hour he went away without it."

Mr. Longdon's watch continued. "He spent the half-hour with her mother instead?"

"Oh 'instead' — it was hardly that. He at all events dropped his idea."

"And what had it been, his idea?"

"You speak as if he had as many as I!" Mitchy replied. "In a manner indeed he has," he continued as if for himself. "But they're of a different kind," he said to Mr. Longdon.

"What had it been, his idea?" the old man, however, simply repeated.

Mitchy's confession at this seemed to explain his previous evasion. "We shall never know."

Mr. Longdon hesitated. "He won't tell *you*?"

"Me?" Mitchy had a pause. "Less than any one."

Many things they had not spoken had already passed between them, and something evidently, to the sense of each, passed during the moment that followed this. "While you were abroad," Mr. Longdon presently asked, "did you hear from him?"

"Never. And I wrote nothing."

"Like me," said Mr. Longdon. "I've neither written nor heard."

"Ah but with you it will be different." Mr. Longdon, as if with the outbreak of an agitation hitherto controlled, had turned abruptly away and, with the usual swing of his glass, begun almost wildly to wander. "You *will* hear."

VANDEBANK

"Ah," Mr. Longdon murmured, "if it had n't been for that —!"

"They hold, they keep every one," Mitchy went on. "It's the sacred terror."

The companions for a little seemed to stand together in this element; after which the elder turned once more away and appeared to continue to walk in it. "Poor Nanda!" then, in a far-off sigh, came across from him to Mitchy. Mitchy on this turned vaguely round to the fire, into which he remained gazing till he heard again Mr. Longdon's voice. "I knew it of course after all. It was what I came up to town for. That night, before you went abroad, at Mrs. Grendon's —"

"Yes?" — Mitchy was with him again.

"Well, made me see the future. It was then already too late."

Mitchy assented with emphasis. "Too late. She was spoiled for him."

If Mr. Longdon had to take it he took it at least quietly, only saying after a time: "And her mother is n't?"

"Oh yes. Quite."

"And does Mrs. Brook know it?"

"Yes, but does n't mind. She resembles you and me. She 'still likes' him."

"But what good will that do her?"

Mitchy sketched a shrug. "What good does it do *us*?"

Mr. Longdon thought. "We can at least respect ourselves."

"*Can* we?" Mitchy smiled.

VANDEBANK

"Well, since you so expressed it yourself, that's what I mean too. I assure you *I* shan't desert her. And if I can help you —!"

"Help me?" Mr. Longdon interrupted, looking at him hard.

It made him a little awkward. "Help you to help her, you know —!"

"You're very wonderful," Mr. Longdon presently returned. "A year and a half ago you wanted to help me to help Mr. Vandebank."

"Well," said Mitchy, "you can't quite say I have n't."

"But your ideas of help are of a splendour —!"

"Oh I've told you about my ideas." Mitchy was almost apologetic.

Mr. Longdon had a pause. "I suppose I'm not indiscreet then in recognising your marriage as one of them. And that, with a responsibility so great already assumed, you appear fairly eager for another —!"

"Makes me out a kind of monster of benevolence?" Mitchy looked at it with a flushed face. "The two responsibilities are very much one and the same. My marriage has brought me, as it were, only nearer to Nanda. My wife and she, don't you see? are particular friends."

Mr. Longdon, on his side, turned a trifle pale; he looked rather hard at the floor. "I see — I see." Then he raised his eyes. "But — to an old fellow like me — it's all so strange."

"It *is* strange." Mitchy spoke very kindly. "But it's all right."

THE AWKWARD AGE

Mr. Longdon gave a headshake that was both sad and sharp. "It's all wrong. But you're all right!" he added in a different tone as he walked hastily away.

BOOK TENTH
NANDA

NANDA

you I shan't easily forgive you if you stand on ceremony. It seems to me that when people have known each other as long as you and I there's one comfort at least they may treat themselves to. I mean of course," Van developed, "that of being easy and frank and natural. There are such a lot of relations in which one is n't, in which it does n't pay, in which 'ease' in fact would be the greatest of troubles and 'nature' the greatest of falsities. However," he continued while he suddenly got up to change the place in which he had put his hat, "I don't really know why I'm preaching at such a rate, for I've a perfect consciousness of not myself requiring it. One does half the time preach more or less for one's self, eh? I'm not mistaken at all events, I think, about the right thing with *you*. And a hint's enough for you, I'm sure, on the right thing with me." He had been looking all round while he talked and had twice shifted his seat; so that it was quite in consonance with his general admiring notice that the next impression he broke out with should have achieved some air of relevance. "What extraordinarily lovely flowers you have and how charming you've made everything! You're always doing something — women are always changing the position of their furniture. If one happens to come in in the dark, no matter how well one knows the place, one sits down on a hat or a puppy-dog. But of course you'll say one does n't come in in the dark, or at least, if one does, deserves what one gets. Only you know the way some women keep their rooms. I'm bound to say *you* don't, do you? — you don't go in for flower-pots in the windows and half

NANDA

tall fellow with the long red beard — was almost as nice as himself. I had talks with *him* too and remember every word he said. I remember he told me you asked questions that showed ‘a deal of study.’ But I thought I had never seen all round such a charming lot of people — I mean as those down there that our friend has got about him. It’s an awfully good note for a man, pleasant servants, I always think, don’t you? Mr. Longdon’s — and quite without their saying anything; just from the sort of type and manner they had — struck me as a kind of chorus of praise. The same with Mitchy’s at Mertle, I remember,” Van rambled on. “Mitchy’s the sort of chap who might have awful ones, but I recollect telling him that one quite felt as if it were with *them* one had come to stay. Good note, good note,” he cheerfully repeated. “I’m bound to say, you know,” he continued in this key, “that you’ve a jolly sense for getting in with people who make you comfortable. Then, by the way, he’s still in town?”

Nanda waited. “Do you mean Mr. Mitchy?”

“Oh *he* is, I know — I met them two nights ago; and by the way again — don’t let me forget — I want to speak to you about his wife. But I’ve not seen, do you know? Mr. Longdon — which is really too awful. Twice, thrice I think, have I at moments like this one snatched myself from pressure; but there’s no finding the old demon at any earthly hour. When do *you* go — or does he only come here? Of course I see you’ve got the place arranged for him. When I asked at his hotel at what hour he ever *is* in, blest if the fellow did n’t say ‘Very often, sir, about

NANDA

and what that she could ever do for him would really be so beautiful as this present chance to smooth his confusion and add as much as possible to that refined satisfaction with himself which would proceed from his having dealt with a difficult hour in a gallant and delicate way? To force upon him an awkwardness was like forcing a disfigurement or a hurt, so that at the end of a minute, during which the expression of her face became a kind of uplifted view of her opportunity, she arrived at the appearance of having changed places with him and of their being together precisely in order that he — not she — should be let down easily.

NANDA

me stand as still as Joshua made the sun." With which he got straight up. "'Young,' you say she is?" — for as if to make up for it he all the more sociably continued. "It's not like anything else. She's youth. She's *my* youth — she *was* mine. And if you ever have a chance," he wound up, "do put in for me that if she wants *really* to know she's booked for my old age. She's clever enough, you know" — and Vanderbank, laughing, went over for his hat — "to understand what you tell her."

Nanda took this in with due attention; she was also now on her feet. "And then she's so lovely."

"Awfully pretty!"

"I don't say it, as they say, you know," the girl continued, "*because* she's mother, but I often think when we're out that wherever she is —!"

"There's no one that all round really touches her?" Vanderbank took it up with zeal. "Oh so every one thinks, and in fact one's appreciation of the charming things in that way so intensely her own can scarcely breathe on them all lightly enough. And then, hang it, she has perceptions — which are not things that run about the streets. She has surprises." He almost broke down for vividness. "She has little ways."

"Well, I'm glad you do like her," Nanda gravely replied.

At this again he fairly faced her, his momentary silence making it still more direct. "I like, you know, about as well as I ever liked anything, this wonderful idea of yours of putting in a plea for her solitude and her youth. Don't think I do it injustice if I say —

NANDA

He produced in some seriousness the first. "Won't she after all see the Mitchys?"

"Not so much either. That of course is now very different."

Vanderbank demurred. "But not for *you*, I gather — is it? Don't you expect to see them?"

"Oh yes — I hope they'll come down."

He moved away a little — not straight to the door. "To Beccles? Funny place for them, a little though, is n't it?"

He had put the question as if for amusement, but Nanda took it literally. "Ah not when they're invited so very very charmingly. Not when he wants them so."

"Mr. Longdon? Then that keeps up?"

"That?" — she was at a loss.

"I mean his intimacy — with Mitchy."

"So far as it is an intimacy."

"But did n't you, by the way" — and he looked again at his watch — "tell me they're just about to turn up together?"

"Oh not so very particularly together."

"Mitchy first alone?" Vanderbank asked.

She had a smile that was dim, that was slightly strange. "Unless you'll stay for company."

"Thanks — impossible. And then Mr. Longdon alone?"

"Unless Mitchy stays."

He had another pause. "You have n't after all told me about the 'evolution' — or the evolutions — of his wife."

"How can I if you don't give me time?"

"I see — of course not." He seemed to feel for an

III

It was half-past five when Mitchy turned up; and her relapse had in the mean time known no arrest but the arrival of tea, which, however, she had left unnoticed. He expressed on entering the fear that he failed of exactitude, to which she replied by the assurance that he was on the contrary remarkably near it and by the mention of all the aid to patience she had drawn from the pleasure of half an hour with Mr. Van — an allusion that of course immediately provoked on Mitchy's part the liveliest interest. "He *has* risked it at last then? How tremendously exciting! And your mother?" he went on; after which, as she said nothing: "Did *she* see him, I mean, and is he perhaps with her now?"

"No; she won't have come in — unless you asked."

"I did n't ask. I asked only for you."

Nanda thought an instant. "But you'll still sometimes come to see her, won't you? I mean you won't ever give her up?"

Mitchy at this laughed out. "My dear child, you're an adorable family!"

She took it placidly enough. "That's what Mr. Van said. He said I'm trying to make a career for her."

"Did he?" Her visitor, though without prejudice to his amusement, appeared struck. "You must have got in with him rather deep."

NANDA

But Mitchy hereupon once more had a drop to extravagance. "Can I do nothing then but repeat him? I came, you know, to be original."

"It would be original for you," Nanda promptly returned, "to be at all like him. But you won't," she went back, "not sometimes come for mother only? You'll have plenty of chances."

This he took up with more gravity. "What do you mean by chances? That you're going away? That *will* add to the attraction!" he exclaimed as she kept silence.

"I shall have to wait," she answered at last, "to tell you definitely what I'm to do. It's all in the air — yet I think I shall know to-day. I'm to see Mr. Longdon."

Mitchy wondered. "To-day?"

"He's coming at half-past six."

"And then you'll know?"

"Well — *he* will."

"Mr. Longdon?"

"I meant Mr. Longdon," she said after a moment.

Mitchy had his watch out. "Then shall I interfere?"

"There are quantities of time. You must have your tea. You see at any rate," the girl continued, "what I mean by your chances."

She had made him his tea, which he had taken. "You do squeeze us in!"

"Well, it's an accident your coming together — except of course that you're *not* together. I simply took the time that you each independently proposed. But it would have been all right even if you *had* met."

NANDA

she can never get rid of on the specious plea that he's only her husband or her lover or her father or her son or her brother or her uncle or her cousin. There, as none of these characters, he just stands."

"Yes," Nanda kindly mused, "he's simply her Mitchy."

"Precisely. And a Mitchy, you see, is — what do you call it? — simply indissoluble. He's moreover inordinately inquisitive. He goes to the length of wondering whether Van also learned that you were expecting *me*."

"Oh yes — I told him everything."

Mitchy smiled. "Everything?"

"I told him — I told him," she replied with impatience.

Mitchy hesitated. "And did he then leave me also a message?"

"No, nothing. What I'm to do for him with Mr. Longdon," she immediately explained, "is to make practically a kind of apology."

"Ah and for me" — Mitchy quickly took it up — "there can be no question of anything of that kind. I see. He has done me no wrong."

Nanda, with her eyes now on the window, turned it over. "I don't much think he would know even if he had."

"I see, I see. And we would n't tell him."

She turned with some abruptness from the outer view. "We would n't tell him. But he was beautiful all round," she went on. "No one could have been nicer about having for so long, for instance, come so little to the house. As if he had n't only too many

NANDA

"For Mr. Van?" How, she seemed to ask, could he doubt it? "Why the very first thing."

"And then will Mr. Longdon tell you?"

"What Mr. Van means?" Nanda thought. "Well — I hope not."

Mitchy followed it up. "You 'hope' —?"

"Why if it's anything that could possibly make any one like him any less. I mean I shan't in that case in the least want to hear it."

Mitchy looked as if he could understand that and yet could also imagine something of a conflict. "But if Mr. Longdon insists —?"

"On making me know? I shan't let him insist. Would *you*?" she put to him.

"Oh I'm not in question!"

"Yes, you are!" she quite rang out.

"Ah —!" Mitchy laughed. After which he added: "Well then, I might overbear you."

"No, you might n't," she as positively declared again, "and you would n't at any rate desire to."

This he finally showed he could take from her — showed it in the silence in which for a minute their eyes met; then showed it perhaps even more in his deep exclamation: "You're complete!"

For such a proposition as well she had the same detached sense. "I don't think I am in anything but the wish to keep *you* so."

"Well — keep me, keep me! It strikes me that I'm not at all now on a footing, you know, of keeping myself. I quite give you notice in fact," Mitchy went on, "that I'm going to come to you henceforth for everything. But you're too wonderful," he wound

NANDA

worked through the long tunnel of artificial reserves and superstitious mysteries, and I at least shall have only to feel that in showing every confidence and dotting every 'i' I follow the example you so admirably set. You go down to the roots? Good. It's all I ask!"

He had dropped into a chair as he talked, and so long as she remained in her own they were confronted; but she presently got up and, the next moment, while he kept his place, was busy restoring order to the objects both her visitors had disarranged. "If you were n't delightful you'd be dreadful!"

"There we are! I could easily, in other words, frighten you if I would."

She took no notice of the remark, only, after a few more scattered touches, producing an observation of her own. "He's going, all the same, Mr. Van, to be charming to mother. We've settled that."

"Ah then he *can* make time —?"

She judged it. "For as much as *that*, yes. For as much, I mean, as may sufficiently show her that he has n't given her up. So don't you recognise how much more time *you* can make?"

"Ah — see precisely — there we are again!" Mitchy promptly ejaculated.

Yet he had gone, it seemed, further than she followed. "But where?"

"Why, as I say, at the roots and in the depths of things."

"Oh!" She dropped to an indifference that was but part of her general patience for all his irony.

"It's needless to go into the question of not giving

NANDA

tum? A final irrevocable flight with him is the line he advises, so that he'll be ready for it on the spot with the post-chaise and the pistols?"

The image appeared really to have for Nanda a certain vividness, and she looked at it a space without a hint of a smile. "We shan't need any pistols, whatever may be decided about the post-chaise; and any flight we may undertake together will need no cover of secrecy or night. Mother, as I've told you —"

"Won't fling herself across your reckless path? I remember," said Mitchy — "you alluded to her magnificent resignation. But father?" he oddly demanded.

Nanda thought for this a moment longer. "Well, Mr. Longdon has — off in the country — a good deal of shooting."

"So that Edward can sometimes come down with his old gun? Good then too — if it is n't, as he takes you by the way, to shoot *you*. You've got it all ship-shape and arranged, in other words, and have only, if the fancy does move you, to clear out. You clear out — you make all sorts of room. *It is interesting*," Mitchy exclaimed, "arriving thus with you at the depths! I look all round and see every one squared and every one but one or two suited. Why then reflexion and delay?"

"You don't, dear Mr. Mitchy," Nanda took her time to return, "know nearly as much as you think."

"But is n't my question absolutely a confession of ignorance and a renunciation of thought? I put myself from this moment forth with you," Mitchy declared, "on the footing of knowing nothing whatever

NANDA

wondering. "Are you going to do anything about it at present? — I mean with our friend?"

She appeared to have a scruple of saying, but at last she produced it. "Yes — he does n't mind now."

Mitchy again laughed out. "You *are*, as a family—!" But he had already checked himself. "Mr. Longdon will at any rate, you imply, be somehow interested —"

"In *my* interests? Of course — since he has gone so far. You expressed surprise at my wanting to wait and think; but how can I not wait and not think when so much depends on the question — now so definite — of how much further he *will* go?"

"I see," said Mitchy, profoundly impressed. "And how much does that depend on?"

She had to reflect. "On how much further I, for my part, *must*."

Mitchy's grasp was already complete. "And he's coming then to learn from you how far this is?"

"Yes — very much."

Mitchy looked about for his hat. "So that of course I see my time's about up, as you'll want to be quite alone together."

Nanda glanced at the clock. "Oh you've a margin yet."

"But you don't want an interval for your thinking —?"

"Now that I've seen you?" Nanda was already very obviously thoughtful.

"I mean if you've an important decision to take."

NANDA

Ah but she kept it up. "*I* had my idea about Aggie."

"Oh don't I know you had? And how you were positive about the sort of person —!"

"That she did n't even suspect herself," Nanda broke in, "to be? I'm equally positive now. It's quite what I believed, only there's ever so much more of it. More *has* come — and more will yet. You see, when there has been nothing before, it all has to come with a rush. So that if even I'm surprised of course she is."

"And of course *I* am!" Mitchy's interest, though even now not wholly unqualified with amusement, had visibly deepened. "You admit then," he continued, "that you're surprised?"

Nanda just hesitated. "At the mere scale of it. I think it's splendid. The only person whose astonishment I don't quite understand," she added, "is Cousin Jane."

"Oh Cousin Jane's astonishment serves her right!"

"If she held so," Nanda pursued, "that marriage should do everything —!"

"She should n't be in such a funk at finding what it *is* doing? Oh no, she's the last one!" Mitchy declared. "I vow I enjoy her scare."

"But it's very bad, you know," said Nanda.

"Oh too awful!"

"Well, of course," the girl appeared assentingly to muse, "she could n't after all have dreamed —!" But she took herself up. "The great thing is to be helpful."

"And in what way —?" Mitchy asked with his wonderful air of inviting competitive suggestions.

IV

THE interval he had represented as likely to be useful to her was in fact, however, not a little abbreviated by a punctuality of arrival on Mr. Longdon's part so extreme as to lead the first thing to a word almost of apology. "You can't say," her new visitor immediately began, "that I have n't left you alone, these many days, as much as I promised on coming up to you that afternoon when after my return to town I found Mr. Mitchett instead of your mother awaiting me in the drawing-room."

"Yes," said Nanda, "you've really done quite as I asked you."

"Well," he returned, "I felt half an hour ago that, near as I was to relief, I could keep it up no longer; so that though I knew it would bring me much too soon I started at six sharp for our trysting-place."

"And I've no tea, after all, to reward you!" It was but now clearly that she noticed it. "They must have removed the things without my heeding."

Her old friend looked at her with some intensity. "Were you in the room?"

"Yes — but I did n't see the man come in."

"What then were you doing?"

Nanda thought; her smile was as usual the faintest discernible outward sign. "Thinking of you."

"So tremendously hard?"

NANDA

ago, and yet your state on his departure remains such that there could be a bustle of servants in the room without your being aware? Kindly give me a lead then as to what it is he has done to you."

She hovered before him with her obscure smile. "You see it for yourself."

He shook his head with decision. "I don't see anything for myself, and I beg you to understand that it's not what I've come here to-day to do. Anything I may yet see which I don't already see will be only, I warn you, so far as you shall make it very clear. There — you've work cut out. And is it with Mr. Mitchett, may I ask, that you've been, as you mention, cutting it?"

Nanda looked about her as if weighing many things; after which her eyes came back to him. "Do you mind if I don't sit down?"

"I don't mind if you stand on your head — at the pass we've come to."

"I shall not try your patience," the girl good-humouredly replied, "so far as that. I only want you not to be worried if I walk about a little."

Mr. Longdon, without a movement, kept his posture. "Oh I can't oblige you there. I *shall* be worried. I've come on purpose to be worried, and the more I surrender myself to the rack the more, I seem to feel, we shall have threshed our business out. So you may dance, you may stamp, if you like, on the absolutely passive thing you've made of me."

"Well, what I *have* had from Mitchy," she cheerfully responded, "is practically a lesson in dancing: by which I perhaps mean rather a lesson in sitting,

NANDA

Mr. Longdon showed on this a coldness that somehow spoke for itself as the greatest with which he had ever in his life met an act of reparation and that was infinitely confirmed by his sustained immobility. "But of what have I complained?"

"Oh I don't think he fancies you've complained."

"And how could he have come to see me," he continued, "when for so many months past I've been so little in town?"

He was not more ready with objections, however, than his companion had by this time become with answers. "He must have been thinking of the time of your present stay. He evidently has you much on his mind — he spoke of not having seen you."

"He has quite sufficiently tried — he has left cards," Mr. Longdon returned. "What more does he want?"

Nanda looked at him with her long grave straightness, which had often a play of light beyond any smile. "Oh, you know, he does want more."

"Then it was open to him —"

"So he so strongly feels" — she quickly took him up — "that you must have felt. And therefore it is I speak for him."

"Don't!" said Mr. Longdon.

"But I promised him I would."

"Don't!" her friend repeated as in stifled pain.

She had kept for the time all her fine clearness turned to him; but she might on this have been taken as giving him up with a movement of obedience and a strange soft sigh. The smothered sound might even

NANDA

even at that the advantages are mainly for others. I'm glad, God knows, that you're not also a young man."

"Then we're suited all round."

She had spoken with a promptitude that appeared again to act on him slightly as an irritant, for he met it — with more delay — by a long and derisive murmur. "Oh *my* pride —!" But this she in no manner took up; so that he was left for a little to his thoughts. "That's what you were plotting when you told me the other day that you wanted time?"

"Ah I was n't plotting — though I was, I confess, trying to work things out. That particular idea of simply asking Mr. Van by letter to present himself — that particular flight of fancy had n't in fact then at all occurred to me."

"It never occurred, I'm bound to say, to *me*," said Mr. Longdon. "I've never thought of writing to him."

"Very good. But you have n't the reasons. I wanted to attack him."

"Not about me, I hope to God!" Mr. Longdon, distinctly a little paler, rejoined.

"Don't be afraid. I think I had an instinct of how you would have taken *that*. It was about mother."

"Oh!" said her visitor.

"He has been worse to her than to you," she continued. "But he'll make it all right."

Mr. Longdon's attention retained its grimness. "If he has such a remedy for the more then, what has he for the less?"

Nanda, however, was but for an instant checked.

NANDA

"You don't know what I would have done for him. You don't know, you don't know!" he repeated — while she looked as if she naturally could n't — as with a renewal of his dream of beneficence and of the soreness of his personal wound.

"Well, but *he* does you justice — he knows. So it shows, so it shows —!"

But in this direction too, unable to say what it showed, she had again broken down and again could only hold herself and let her companion sit there. "Ah Nanda, Nanda!" he deeply murmured; and the depth of the pity was, vainly and blindly, as the depth of a reproach.

"It's I — it's I, therefore," she said as if she must then so look at it with him; "it's I who am the horrible impossible and who have covered everything else with my own impossibility. For some different person you *could* have done what you speak of, and for some different person you can do it still."

He stared at her with his barren sorrow. "A person different from him?"

"A person different from *me*."

"And what interest have I in any such person?"

"But your interest in me — you see well enough where *that* lands us."

Mr. Longdon now got to his feet and somewhat stiffly remained; after which, for all answer, "You say you *will* come then?" he asked. Then as — seemingly with her last thought — she kept silent: "You understand clearly, I take it, that this time it's never again to leave me — or to *be* left."

NANDA

"When."

She hesitated. "When *have* n't we?"

"Well, *you* may have: if that's what you call talking — never saying a word. But I have n't. I've only to do at any rate, in the way of reasons, with my own."

"And yours too then remain? Because, you know," the girl pursued, "I *am* like that."

"Like what?"

"Like what he thinks." Then so gravely that it was almost a supplication, "Don't tell me," she added, "that you don't *know* what he thinks. You do know."

Their eyes, on that strange ground, could meet at last, and the effect of it was presently for Mr. Longdon. "I do know."

"Well?"

"Well!" He raised his hands and took her face, which he drew so close to his own that, as she gently let him, he could kiss her with solemnity on the forehead. "Come!" he then very firmly said — quite indeed as if it were a question of their moving on the spot.

It literally made her smile, which, with a certain compunction, she immediately corrected by doing for him in the pressure of her lips to his cheek what he had just done for herself. "To-day?" she more seriously asked.

He looked at his watch. "To-morrow."

She paused, but clearly for assent. "That's what I mean by your taking me as I am. It *is*, you know, for a girl — extraordinary."

NANDA

So again before he went they were for a minute confronted. "Are you anxious about Mitchy?"

She faltered, but at last brought it out. "Yes. Do you see? There I am."

"I see. There we are. Well," said Mr. Longdon —
"to-morrow."

1. The first part of the document is a list of the names of the persons who were present at the meeting.

